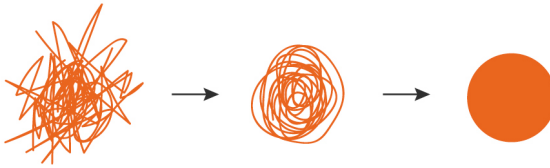

THE
IMPLEMENTER'S
STARTER KIT



How to Plan and Execute
Organizational Change Like a Master,
Even If You Aren't One Yet

WENDY HIRSCH

THE IMPLEMENTER'S STARTER KIT

How to Plan and Execute Organizational Change Like a Master, Even if
You Aren't One Yet

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INTRODUCTION

DOES THIS SEEM FAMILIAR?

Have you ever finished celebrating the approval of a new strategy or major initiative and thought, “Now, what?!”

Or had a great idea to improve your organization, followed by a sinking feeling when you asked yourself, “But how would we *do* that?”

Or finished rolling out a new tool or practice only to find no one using it after a few months?

You are not alone.

When implementation is an afterthought or approached with a quick and dirty ethos, things may get done, but they rarely produce results. If you don’t get the intended benefits from your effort, can you genuinely call it a success?

There are no silver bullet solutions guaranteed to make all change implementations successful. However, there are sound practices and principles that, when used consistently, can increase your chances of truly making a difference in your organization.

That’s what this book is about.

THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU

This book is for those new to change implementation as well as those looking for new perspectives to bring to their change efforts. Because whether you are in the early days of your career or have a wealth of professional experience, implementation can be a challenge if you don't have a defined approach.

Although the majority of this book is directed at the person leading the implementation team, sometimes called an implementation lead, project manager, or change lead, the ideas and tips offered are relevant to anyone who is keen on better understanding the art and science of implementation. We'll cover the fundamentals of effective implementation management, such as designing the implementation approach, planning for execution, monitoring progress, interacting with leadership and stakeholders, and developing your team.

Specifically, this book is for you, if...

- You have technical or managerial experience, but are new to implementation and are **unsure where to start**.
- You are an experienced implementer looking for a fresh outlook or alternative approaches to **improve your results**.
- You are beginning your career or are looking to advance and want to **build a new skill set**.
- You are an experienced implementer, but want a deeper

understanding of the fundamentals of implementation so that you **can coach others**.

- You are an executive or manager supervising implementation staff and want a **stronger foundation in the core concepts** of implementation.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

My goal is to provide you with a firm grounding in the fundamentals of effective implementation. The ideas presented in this book are based on my 20 years of practical experience, as well as a robust body of academic research about what works in implementation. Importantly, the principles and methods outlined are adaptable and can be used to support the implementation of all kinds of organizational change, such as new processes, practices, strategies, or tools.

Specifically, the book is designed to help you build confidence in three areas:

- 1. What you need to do:** I introduce a simple framework that provides you with a blueprint you can use to plan and execute your next implementation.
- 2. Why you should do it:** I explain the purpose of each part of the framework and how it supports effective implementation.
- 3. How to get started:** In addition to theory, I provide examples, tools, and other “how to” information throughout the book. At the end of most chapters, I offer a list of Starter Steps to help you begin applying the ideas presented.

What you won't find in this book and why

Equally important to what you will find in this book, is what you will not, such as:

A cookie-cutter approach. Context is a significant factor in implementation. The ability to tailor your methods to your operating environment is an essential skill for any implementer. For that reason, I focus as much on best principles, as best practices.¹ A strong grounding in such principles will equip you to adapt to the variety of contexts and types of implementation you will face on the job.

Deep-dives into technical topics. A proficient implementer is one that has developed expertise in a variety of domains, such as project management, team leadership, measurement, and communications. However, a full exploration of such technical domains is beyond the scope of this book. Rather, I take a “first things first” approach. I aim to clarify the fundamental skills you need and provide examples, tools, and practical action steps to help you begin applying them in your work. In my view, that’s plenty to get you started.

Requirements for specific types of implementation. I aim to help you build a base of knowledge that you can apply to all sorts of change implementations. As such, this book does not address requirements for particular types of implementation, such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems or evidence-based health and education programs.

Notes

1. I was introduced to the term “best principles” in the work of Mary Northridge and Sara Metcalf. They note: “Best principles, as distinct from the more customary term ‘best practices’, are used to underscore the need to extract the core issues from the context in which they are embedded in order to better ensure that they are transferable across settings.” See Northridge, M. E., & Metcalf, S. S. (2016). Enhancing implementation science by applying best principles of systems science. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 14(1), 74. doi: [10.1186/s12961-016-0146-8](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-016-0146-8)

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book is designed to be a partner to you throughout your next implementation. Although you can read it straight through, it may be most valuable to use it as a reference book. You can delve into topics based on where you are in your current implementation or the skills you want to strengthen.

To help you do that, I organized the book into six parts that relate to the core questions you will face when designing and executing any change implementation — Why? What? When? How? Who? Where?

The first three parts — Why, What, and When — provide an overview of the foundational aspects of implementation to ensure you have a firm grounding on which to build your approach.

Part I — Why: You'll learn why it's important to take a disciplined and informed approach to implementation, rather than making it up as you go along.

Part II — What: You'll get acquainted with the basics of the implementation framework that forms the foundation of this book.

Part III — When: You'll learn the five phases of implementation, as well as how to focus your actions based on each phase.

In the last three sections — How, Who, and Where — we delve into the individual elements of the framework, each of which will be relevant to you at various times during the planning and execution of your effort.

Part IV — How: You'll learn about the tools you use to implement. Specifically, each chapter in this section focuses on a different component of the implementation framework, such as infrastructure, measurement, or training.

Part V — Who: You'll learn about the critical roles that people play in the implementation process, what's required of those who fill these roles, and how to engage with them to successfully execute your implementation.

Part VI — Where: You'll learn how to identify critical contextual factors, both internal and external, to inform your implementation approach.

To help you better understand the concepts presented in each section, you'll find brief case studies and example tools throughout the book. Additionally, most chapters conclude with a set of Starter Steps designed to help you begin immediately putting the methods presented to work for you.

PART I: WHY

In this section, we explore the answer to our first question: Why do we need to take a comprehensive approach to implementation? We also discuss the fundamental principles of effective implementation using a case study of a state-wide education implementation.

THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Why "just do it" doesn't work

When implementing any change, the first thing you need to do is clarify why you are doing it. You need to be explicit about the purpose of the change and what you want to achieve.

You should ask the same questions about your implementation approach. What is the purpose of adopting a comprehensive rather than an ad-hoc strategy when implementing? What do you achieve by being proactive and purposeful in your efforts?

Knowing the answer to these questions is vital for a few reasons.

First, when leading an implementation, you need to be confident in your plan of attack. That doesn't mean you won't be unsure at some points or won't make mistakes. You will. Rather, what I'm talking about is the underlying conviction that when it comes down to it, you know what you need to do and why you need to do it.

Second, you will, at some point, work with leaders who believe that when something is implemented you "just do it" — that elbow grease and chutzpah are all that's needed. In such situations, a keen understanding of effective implementation methods can help you to convince those with power that unless you direct

that chutzpah in a thoughtful way, it's unlikely to create much value.

Third, when you demonstrate expertise in implementation, it may have a beneficial impact on end users. Research indicates there is an association between staff perceptions of management competence to implement change and stress, uncertainty, and skepticism during a period of change.¹

Finally, the last reason is that the answers to these questions exist! What makes for effective implementation is *not* a huge mystery. True, there is no fool-proof solution to all implementation challenges, and probably never will be. But there are strong indications that some things work better than others.

Implementation failures led to the development of a wide body of research

As far back as the 1940s, academics were theorizing about organizational change.² In the 1970s, researchers began looking at specific tactics people use to implement change in organizations, often focusing on the role of management.³

In the 1990s, researchers in healthcare sought to understand why medical innovations were not being used. They were frustrated that practices, which had been tested and found effective in studies, were not benefiting patients. The reason? Often it was because medical personnel in hospitals and doctors' offices weren't adequately implementing them. This research became a field of study known as implementation science or implementation research.⁴

Over the last 20 years or so, investigations into what makes for effective implementation have expanded beyond healthcare interventions, to look at education and social programs. The wave of high-stakes implementation related to Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems has also produced its own body of research.

Taken in combination, these investigations into what works in implementation (and what doesn't) have yielded some themes, but no guaranteed prescriptions, for effective implementation. One resoundingly clear idea in the research, however, is that it's just as important to focus on *how* you implement, as it is on *what* you implement.

Effective implementation requires skillful use of a system of complementary parts

Mastering the “how” of implementation requires the development of a system and the ability to use that system effectively. To better understand this idea, let's look at the example of the carmaker Toyota. In recent years, safety recalls put a dent in Toyota's rock-solid reputation for quality. However, in the 1980s, the car company became famous not only for the cars it produced but also for how it made them.

In fact, at that time Toyota surprised everyone by regularly giving tours to engineers from competing carmakers. In particular, these tours provided a close-up look at Toyota's famed continuous improvement process. But, Toyota didn't feel there was any risk in showing their competition precisely *what* they did. Why?

As John Shook, an American who worked for Toyota in Japan, put it: “Remember how Vince Lombardi always said he would share his playbook with anyone, but nobody could execute like the old Green Bay Packers? It is the same thing with Toyota. Everybody has techniques and practices, but nobody has a system like Toyota's.”⁵

Toyota understood what implementation research shows us — *how* you implement matters as much as *what* you implement. Further, in creating the “Toyota Way,” the company demonstrated the benefits of integrating skills and practices into a well-functioning, systematic approach.

Effective implementation requires an approach grounded in best principles

As the example of Toyota demonstrates, a systematic approach to implementation is required. However, this need not be complicated. An effective implementation often has a simplicity to it, which is rooted in the principles that support it.

The method outlined in the remainder of this book is grounded in several core principles, including:

- Start by defining the problem you are trying to solve and how you'll know when you've solved it.
- Evaluate the best solution to the problem, investigating not only the evidence supporting various options but also your capacity to implement them.
- Define the solution with enough specificity that everyone can understand what it is and what it isn't.
- Develop a plan and assemble a diverse team to execute it.
- Support adoption by end users with training and ongoing coaching.
- Work closely with — and listen to — stakeholders at all levels.
- Pay attention to context.

These principles may strike you as common sense. However, for many people working in implementation, the problem is not recognizing that these things are important in the abstract. It's being disciplined and organized enough to do them. In practice, our enthusiasm for a new solution or our ambition to achieve big things can entice us to cast aside common sense for quick-fix approaches, which rarely produce promised results.

Before we delve further into the details of the implementation framework that forms the core of this book, we'll first review a case study through the lens of these principles. This example

demonstrates what can happen when you implement with good intentions, but without a comprehensive approach.

Notes

1. See Oreg, S., Vakola, M., & Armenakis, A. (2011). Change recipients' reactions to organizational change A 60-year review of quantitative studies. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 47(4). doi: [10.1177/0021886310396550](https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886310396550)
2. For an overview of Kurt Lewin's change theory and a summary of six decades of additional work on change, see Burnes, B. (2004). Kurt Lewin and the planned approach to change: A re-appraisal. *Journal of Management Studies*, 41(6), 977-1002. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-6486.2004.00463.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2004.00463.x)
3. For a helpful summary of implementation research in the 1970s, see Nutt, P. C. (1986). Tactics of implementation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 29(2), 230-261. doi: [10.2307/256187](https://doi.org/10.2307/256187)
4. For an overview of implementation science see Bauer, M. S., Damschroder, L., Hagedorn, H., Smith, J., & Kilbourne, A. M. (2015). An introduction to implementation science for the non-specialist. *BMC Psychology*, 3(1), 32. doi: [10.1186/s40359-015-0089-9](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-015-0089-9)
5. Quoted from Taylor, A., & Kahn, J. (1997). How Toyota defies gravity. *Fortune*, 136 (11), 100-106. Retrieved from http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1997/12/08/234926/index.htm

CASE STUDY: PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

Lessons from a school-based implementation in California

In the mid-1990s, the Governor of California secured passage of legislation that aimed to increase student performance in math and reading by reducing the size of classes in elementary grades throughout the state.¹ This initiative in California was inspired, at least in part, by a pilot program in Tennessee called Project STAR. Project STAR had garnered national attention for impacting student outcomes through the adoption of smaller class sizes.

The class-size reduction program in California was voluntary and offered to all elementary schools throughout the state. The program provided schools with \$650 for each student in a class with fewer than 20 other kids. The dollar amount offered was the same for all schools, regardless of the size of their classes at the start of the program.

By the end of the first year, nearly 90% of first-grade students in California public schools were in classes of reduced size, with almost 60% of second graders in such classes. The program also proved to be wildly popular with teachers and parents alike. So, it seems, the California program got things done. Class sizes were smaller; teachers and parents were happy.

However, the purpose of the program was to improve student

outcomes. You may wonder, how did the program do in those terms? Unfortunately, after two years, and spending \$2.5B, the California effort demonstrated negligible impact on student outcomes.

Why was a program that was successful in improving student outcomes in Tennessee, less so in California? There are probably many reasons, but when we get into the details, it seems at least part of the cause had to do with a failure to adhere to the best principles of effective implementation. Let's look at a few examples.

PRINCIPLE: Evaluate potential solutions based on technical appropriateness and your capacity to implement

The California effort focused mainly on copying *what* was done in the Tennessee program, i.e., the innovation of small class sizes. It does not appear, however, that the California legislators studied *how* this innovation was implemented in Tennessee before offering it to all schools in the state. Nor did they question whether the innovation of small classroom sizes was the most cost-effective means to increase literacy scores in the context of California schools. Perhaps reducing class sizes was *a* solution to lagging student outcomes, rather than *the* solution to that problem.

California was not alone in embracing class-size reduction as a solution to its achievement challenges. Many states chose to implement this innovation, although reportedly not many studied its efficacy before implementing it.

PRINCIPLE: Engage with stakeholders at all levels and plan before acting

The California legislation to reduce class sizes passed in July 1996, less than two months before the start of the school year. Consider the practical challenges this posed for school administrators. If you want smaller class sizes, but have the same number

of students, you have to increase the number of available teachers and classrooms. In fact, implementing the program required securing some 18,000 additional classrooms and 12,000 new teachers in just a few months. This proved to be an impossible task.

Eventually, due to the teacher shortage prompted by smaller class sizes, the Governor signed legislation that relaxed teacher certification standards, raising questions about instruction quality.

PRINCIPLE: Define what you are implementing and implement it consistently

Although the Tennessee and California programs were both class-size reduction efforts, what was implemented in each state was quite different.

In California, districts were given the discretion to implement the program to varying degrees. For example, one school could reduce the size of all K-3 classes, while another could choose to do so only in first and second grades. Notably, at its start, the California program involved *150 times* the number of students that were part of the Tennessee effort. Therefore, although class sizes were reduced, what was considered a small class in California was still much larger than it had been in the Tennessee program. Further, due to a lack of available, qualified staff and suitable space, some classes in California were led by uncertified teachers and in places not intended to be used as classrooms, such as gyms and libraries.

Should one assume that two programs that were similar in name, but not in practice, would produce similarly promising results? Likely not.

PRINCIPLE: Support adoption through training and ongoing coaching to end users

States that evaluated the effectiveness of their class-size reduc-

tion programs found that significant outcomes could result from this intervention. However, these outcomes were dependent on several factors *beyond classroom size*, including a supply of qualified teachers, suitable classroom space, rigorous curricula, and professional development for teachers.

Helping teachers put good practices in place is essential to getting those practices to have an impact on kids.

What happened in California is not unique

Even if you don't have professional experience in government or education, if you've worked in an organization, you can probably name a few implementations that fell short for some of the reasons highlighted in this case. The basics of good implementation are commonly overlooked, even in a highly public, big-ticket effort such as this one in California. Unfortunately, as this case also demonstrates, quick-fix approaches to implementation are a risky proposition if you are looking to achieve results beyond popularity.

Imagine how different things may have been if a few trained implementers had been involved in this effort from the beginning. In the next section, we'll delve further into what that might look like.

Notes

1. This case was adapted from information provided in Bohrnstedt, G. W., & Stecher, B. M. (2002). What we have learned about class size reduction in California. Sacramento: California Department of Education. Retrieved from http://www.classsize.org/techreport/CSRYear4_final.pdf, and Stecher, B. M. & Bohrnstedt, G. W. (Eds.). (2002). Class size reduction in California: Findings from 1999–00 and 2000–01. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education. Retrieved from https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/year3_technicalreport.pdf

PART II: WHAT

In this section, we delve into our second question: What is implementation? Through a brief overview of the implementation framework that forms the foundation of this book, you'll gain a bird's-eye view of the pieces and parts that make up an effective implementation system.

WHAT IS IMPLEMENTATION?

The three I's of implementation

I define implementation in a multidimensional way through what I call the three “I’s” of implementation — Implementation, Innovation, and Integrity.¹ Let’s review each in turn.

Implementation: A dual-purpose process

Implementation (v): To make something active and effective.

As used in this book, implementation refers to a process through which you put something in place within an organization and ensure it produces results. You must do both.

Although there are many definitions of the word implementation, I like this one because it reflects its dual aims. When leading an implementation, it’s essential to keep the results you want to achieve top of mind. Failing to do so can cause you and your stakeholders to mistake activity for outcomes.

Take the example of the California class-size reduction effort mentioned in the previous section. Although class sizes for grades K-3 were reduced in the majority of schools in the state, the desired impact on student achievement was limited. They made something active — smaller class sizes — but it was not effective because the new practice did not produce the intended results.

Innovation: What you implement

Innovation (n): The change being implemented.

The innovation is the new thing you put in place when you implement. It could be a strategy, practice, process, technology, policy, or something else! In the case study outlined in the previous section, the innovation being implemented was smaller class sizes in grades K-3.

Some people refer to the innovation as an intervention or simply a change. I prefer the term innovation for a few reasons.

First, the word innovation signals the inherent novelty in implementation. When we implement, we are almost always introducing something new, which means we are entering uncharted territory. We are encouraging people to alter what they do, how they think, and how they behave. Many people find this challenging. They are not accustomed to the innovation, and as a result, they may be a bit clumsy with it at first. There is a learning curve inherent in any implementation; patience is essential.

Second, I like the positive implication of the word innovation. It's exciting, fresh, and full of optimism. Implementation can be hard, but it is also full of possibility! That's important to remember, particularly when things get difficult, which they will.

Integrity: How you implement for results

Integrity (n): Faithfulness or adherence to the defined innovation.

Integrity refers to how much the innovation is modified during the implementation process. People will customize, adjust, and make the innovation their own. On the one hand, this is productive because it helps end users to develop a sense of ownership and control. The risk with such customizations is that they can result in many different innovations being implemented, which can have significant implications for the outcomes you achieve.

The integrity of your implementation will be impacted by how well you define the innovation, train people how to use it, coach them through rough spots, and monitor your efforts to identify necessary adjustments.

To better understand this concept, let's look again at the case study on class-size reduction, where the innovation was arguably not implemented with integrity. We saw that classes were made smaller in the California program, but, on average, remained much larger than they were in the Tennessee program on which the California effort was modeled. Additionally, in California, each district was given leeway to implement the class-size reduction in just a few grades or all K-3 classes. Further, the reduction in class sizes caused a sharp increase in demand for space and teachers. As a result, many classes were taught by uncertified teachers and in areas not intended to be used as classrooms.

These are all examples of variations that reduced the integrity of the implementation in California and likely impacted the results achieved. We'll discuss this topic in depth in the [Innovation](#) chapter.

Notes

1. Terms are not standard in the fields of implementation and change management; others may define implementation differently.

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