A Problem-Solving Approach to Designing and Implementing a Strategy to Improve Performance: Synopsis

The problem-solving approach to designing and implementing a strategy includes seven steps (see Figure A):

1. Identify the Problem
2. Analyze the Problem and Diagnose Its Causes
3. Develop a Theory of Action
4. Design the Strategy
5. Plan for Implementation
6. Implement the Strategy
7. Assess Progress
8. Adapt and Modify for Continuous Improvement

Figure A  Problem-Solving Approach to Strategy Design and Implementation
Teams rarely move through each step sequentially, and might get stuck and revisit earlier steps throughout the process. However, each step is critical to improving system-wide performance.

Steps

**Identify the Problem.** The first and most critical step of solving a performance problem is to accurately identify it. The performance problem your team selects should be grounded in the instructional core. Often teams try to address an unsatisfactory outcome—such as low student achievement—without identifying a serious problem that contributes to it. If a team does not take this step seriously, a lack of rigor will likely result in a weak theory of action. Problem definitions that focus on blaming others such as “there isn’t enough money” or “the union is against it” are tempting because they absolve us of responsibility for taking action. As Rick DuFour (2004) puts it, rather than focusing outward on forces over which you have little control, your team should identify a problem that is within its sphere of influence. DuFour calls this looking “in the mirror” instead of “out the window.”

**Analyze the Problem and Diagnose Its Causes.** Once your team has identified the problem, you must figure out what is really going on. We challenge you to look internally at your district’s practices and results, and be ready to recognize what role the district office might play in the problem. It is important to consider the problem from the perspectives of teachers and administrators in the schools or parents. Understanding the root causes of the problem you identify will prepare your team to address it.

**Develop a Theory of Action.** The next step is to formulate a theory of action for how to solve the problem you identified by attacking its root causes. A district’s theory of action is a statement about cause and effect. Typically, it takes the form: “If we do X...then Y will occur.” In other words, which actions does your team think will lead to your desired results?

**Design the Strategy.** Your strategy is simply the set of coherent actions you will take to put your theory into practice and solve the problem you have identified. It should include the target of the intervention (particular student groups, grade levels, content areas, or employee groups), the specific actions that will be taken, and the timetable for implementation and results. In addition to identifying the activities of your strategy in this step, you must diagnose the level of coherence in your organization with your new strategy.

**Plan for Implementation.** Preparing to implement the strategy is as important as implementing it. In this step, your team should identify the resources needed to successfully execute the strategy. These might include financial resources, people, and/or technology. Pay particular attention to the people aspects of the implementation plan. A strategy’s success or failure is largely dependent on the ability of the relevant staff members to perform the tasks that make the strategy come to life, and it is important to identify knowledge or skill gaps in the planning phase. Don’t overlook the political support that you might need, both within the system and outside it. Your team should also anticipate challenges that are likely to come up during implementation and find ways to address them in advance.

**Implement the Strategy.** During this step, people must have the resources, knowledge, skills and support they need in order to implement the strategy with fidelity. District leaders need to take the time to ensure that everyone understands the strategy, how his or her particular job or task contributes to the overall effort, and why it is important. District leaders must also solicit feedback and suggestions from those who are implementing the strategy—typically teachers and principals. In addition to the necessary skills, employees must have the will to implement.
Assess Progress. While implementation is underway, you should be collecting, analyzing, and making decisions based on data about three dimensions: 1) the progress of the implementation; 2) the effectiveness of the strategy; and 3) the validity of the theory of action.

Adapt and Modify for Continuous Improvement. Throughout the implementation of the strategy, you might discover new problems or miss original targets. By adapting and modifying the implementation plan, the strategy and the theory of action as more information becomes available, leadership teams can accelerate their progress. Modifications could be as simple as addressing an unforeseen skill gap in key personnel or as complicated as adapting to changes in state regulations.

Problem-Solving Approach to Strategy: Guiding Questions for Each Step

Identify the Problem

- What is the performance problem we are trying to solve? What are three or four observable symptoms of the overall problem we identified? Be sure that it is linked to activities and outcomes related to the instructional core (students, teachers, academic content)

- How can we describe the problem in simple terms with no jargon (no more than a sentence or two)?

Analyze the Problem and Diagnose Its Causes

- Often it is not possible to identify a single root cause of a problem. Therefore, the team will need to spend time examining possible causes for the problem and deciding which best explains why the problem occurs and persists. Often it is not possible to do everything at once, and your team should develop a common point of view about where to start.

- What are the consequences of not solving the problem? Be specific. How will a failure to act affect students over the long-term? How will it impact district-wide performance in the medium term?

Develop a Theory of Action

- What specific actions do we think will reduce or eliminate the effects of one or more of the root causes we identified in the previous step?

- Why do we think these actions will lead to the results we desire? In other words, what assumptions are we making about how kids learn? How adults learn? How our team operates? About our context or environment? About our students and their families? Stating these assumptions upfront can help everyone understand what beliefs underpin your theory of action.

- From the above analysis, construct an “if…then…” statement that communicates the theory of action.
Design the Strategy

- What set of actions will we take to put our theory of action into practice? How do the specific actions map back to the assumptions about cause and effect that underpin our theory of action?
- Who will be affected by our actions (students, stakeholders, employees)?
- What is a reasonable timeframe over which the actions have to be consistently implemented to achieve results? (Build this directly into your strategy statement.)
- Are the relevant systems, structures, resources and culture of our organization likely to make it easier or harder to effectively implement the strategy? If they make it harder, what changes are needed in order to increase the likelihood that we can implement the strategy well? (If you have significant diagnostic work to perform in this area, consult the Note on the PELP Coherence Framework for guiding questions about each piece of your organization.)
- What are the specific short, medium and long term targets we will hit if our strategy is successful?

Plan for Implementation

- What steps will we take to implement our strategy? Who will do what by when?
- What material resources are required to implement the strategy? (Curricular materials, technology, physical space, etc.)
- Is new training needed to ensure that the people asked to implement pieces of the strategy have the skills they need to do their best work?
- How much will the implementation cost? How will we pay for it? Will there be savings in other areas related to the new strategy?
- What are the implications for teachers, principals, and central office staff if nothing changes? This question helps uncover particular groups who might feel threatened by the changes you propose.
- How will we build support for the strategy, especially among stakeholder groups who think that they may lose out as a result of the change?
- What roadblocks (both internal and external) are we likely to encounter? What can we do to prevent or quickly address them? Who will be accountable for managing the response to roadblocks?
- Who – individual or group – will “own” the implementation? Who will ensure that people and schools have what they need and are actually performing the work necessary for a successful implementation?
- What are some specific benchmarks we will measure throughout the process to assess whether or not the implementation is on track? What indicators will let us know if the strategy is as effective as we imagine it will be? What measures should we put in place to assess the validity of our theory of action and test the assumptions embedded in the theory?
• Are there systems in place to collect the data needed for the indicators developed above? If not, how will we create them? Who will be responsible for analyzing the data that is gathered? Is there an existing team that is the logical group to make decisions based on the analysis? If not, should we create an ad hoc team for this purpose? Who should be part of this team?

**Implement the Strategy**

• Do people understand how their day-to-day actions are related to the strategy? Is the strategy meaningful to them?

• Are we providing the supports people need to enable them to successfully perform the work required of them during the implementation phase?

• Are people actually implementing the strategy as it was designed? If not, why not? Are there consequences for failing to implement the strategy?

• What is the process for making sure that all participants provide regular feedback that will allow us to continuously improve performance by adapting the strategy as we learn?

**Assess Progress**

• What can we learn from the data we are gathering about the progress we are making in solving the problem we identified? What do our interim results tell us about our predictions about cause and effect?

• Are we achieving all of the milestones we set during the implementation planning step? Are we on track in terms of timelines? Budget projections? Staff allocations?

• If we are missing milestones, why is that happening? Was the initial schedule unrealistically ambitious? Did we underestimate the time certain activities would take to accomplish? Did our forecasts fail to account for important factors? Have barriers come up that were unexpected? Should we adjust our expectations or accelerate our efforts in order to meet our original targets?

• Are individuals and/or teams engaging productively in the activities that the strategy requires? If not, why? Is it a problem of skill, which would call for us to provide more training and development? Or, is it a problem of will? Are some people opting out of the whole approach, believing that “this too shall pass”? If so, what steps will we take to help people change their behavior? If this is ineffective, what will we do?

• If our implementation seems on track but we are missing our targets, should we reexamine our strategy or our theory of action? Did we misdiagnose the causes of the problem?

• If not, what can we learn from our feedback loops that might help us revise the strategy to make it more effective? Are there alternative activities that might be more powerful?

• Have we learned anything during implementation of our strategy that challenges any of the assumptions embedded in our theory? About our diagnosis of root causes?

**Adapt and Modify for Continuous Improvement**

• How should we respond to the information generated in the “assess” step?
• If we are making progress in solving the initial problem we identified, what adjustments do we need to make to our approach now that one or more of the root causes might be diminishing in importance?

• How can we create opportunities for the people involved in the work to celebrate progress while maintaining a sense of urgency about solving difficult performance problems over the long term?