



PHASE: A Practical Approach to Implementation

Implementation science is the study of strategies to promote the successful adoption and integration of policies, practices, or programs. PHASE is a research-based implementation framework specifically designed for court professionals.

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Even the most meticulously crafted plans can encounter challenges when it comes to implementation. Lack of buy-in, limited resources, and the absence of readiness can stall or stop an action plan in its tracks. This is especially true in the court community, where there may be frequent shifts in priorities, multiple partners with diverse perspectives, and resistance to change. Fortunately, research from other fields, including education, healthcare, and social services, can teach strategies to drive successful change efforts. This area of study is called implementation science, and its application in justice settings is growing (Zielinski, Allison, and Brinkley-Rubenstein, 2020).

Implementation science is the study of strategies to promote the adoption and integration of practices and programs. Lessons from implementation science bridge the gap between plan and practice and optimize the conditions that lead to effective implementation. There are many different implementation frameworks; however, most agree that implementation happens over time and in phases and can be impacted by factors external to the change itself, such as policies, organizational culture, and leadership. Successful implementation of a policy or practice change begins long before it is executed. Implementation starts with an intentional focus on mobilizing interest, consensus, and support among key partners and the building of structural supports, such as policies, performance measures, and feedback loops (Fixsen et al., 2005).

The National Center for State Courts (NCSC) developed the PHASE framework, a practical approach to help courts implement new policies, programs, and practices. The PHASE framework integrates research-based strategies from implementation science in other fields to support courts in cultivating the internal and external conditions that create environments conducive to change. It creates an easy-to-follow structure for courts on how to intentionally plan for implementation efforts. The framework has five components.



PURPOSE

A clear statement of the purpose for making a change, including its anticipated outcomes, is critical for successful implementation. It can keep the effort focused and unite court professionals, community members, and partners in support. A purpose statement should cover two key aspects:

- Description of the issue prompting the change, including specific areas for improvement.
- Anticipated consequences of the change, including its expected impact on processes and long-term outcomes.



HOW

Failure to establish readiness for a change is the most common reason change efforts fail (Weiner, 2009). When preparing to implement a change, court professionals can assess readiness by identifying individuals who will be involved or impacted, understanding the court's current capacity for change, and considering how the court's organizational culture may affect change efforts. When preparing to implement a new policy or practice, ask these questions:

- Are there resources (e.g., workforce, financial, time) to implement the change?
- How do individuals who will be involved or impacted by the change feel about it?
- Is there a court or judicial leader who is a champion for the change?



ACTION PLAN

A clearly documented action plan is vital for courts implementing new policies or programs. It ensures clear communication, aligns efforts, optimizes resources, and fosters accountability. The action plan also documents implementation strategies to mitigate risks identified in the readiness assessment (Powell et al., 2015). Key elements of an action plan include:

- Agreed upon tasks, timelines, and responsibilities.
- Clear expectations for communication frequency and methods to track progress on the action plan.
- Performance measures to monitor implementation.



SUPPORT

Court professionals and partners crucial to court operations benefit from strategic support via training, coaching, and feedback loops. These activities foster successful knowledge transfer, skill building, and a court culture that values continuous improvement. Intentionally planning how to prepare individuals to implement a new policy or practice includes:

- A targeted training schedule ensuring a shared understanding of the change and the reasons for it.
- Individualized coaching to support behavior change.
- Intentional feedback loops to share information and receive feedback from court professionals and partners.



EXAMINE

Evaluating whether a program, policy, or practice achieves its intended outcomes requires waiting until it is fully implemented; however, examining how implementation is going can provide valuable insights throughout the implementation process. Considerations when planning how to examine implementation include:

- Identifying the data necessary to objectively measure progress and when and how it will be collected.
- Processes and opportunities for sharing and discussing information to assess fidelity, identify successes and barriers, and inform adjustments to the action plan.

Pilot Testing the PHASE Framework

In fall 2023, NCSC welcomed 22 courts into the Implementation Consulting Collaborative (ICC) to pilot the PHASE framework. The ICC focused on educating participating courts on the PHASE framework and helping them apply it to real changes they are making in their courts. This involved a five-part virtual-training series, concurrent development of implementation plans, and follow-up monthly consultations. The pilot aimed to evaluate how the PHASE framework supports court professionals in assessing readiness, identifying strategies to address barriers, creating action plans, and implementing new policies and practices.

NCSC is evaluating the ICC to assess whether the content of the ICC was valuable and applicable to participants, how much the ICC contributed to participants' knowledge about key aspects of implementation science, and the extent to which the PHASE framework contributed to the effective implementation of court improvements. It takes years for efforts to be fully implemented. This article describes the short-term outcomes of the evaluation, including the usefulness and applicability of the framework and changes in knowledge.

The worksheets were given as homework at the end of each training session, and participants were asked to submit their completed homework before the next training session. Several participants shared that the worksheets helped them think through details often overlooked during action planning. For example, one participant reflected that the stakeholder analysis worksheet was “a crucial step worth taking more time to consider.” They added that without intentionally analyzing the influence and support of stakeholders, implementation efforts can “lose out on potential partners or miss opportunities.” Another participant shared how the worksheets helped managers slow down and be intentional, stating, “As a manager, we are all busy and often want to press the easy button for everything, but this does not allow you to do that; instead, it forces you to slow down, think and take time showing that the investment [of time] really pays off.”

As part of NCSC’s evaluation efforts, participants were asked to complete a survey after each session. One of the items on the survey asked them to rate the relevance of the session’s content to their work. An average of 11 participants completed the evaluation at the end of each session. Participants felt strongly that the training content was relevant to their current work, and 91 percent rated the content as extremely relevant or very relevant across all five sessions (see *Figure 2*).

Similarly, participants reported that they would use what they learned in each session. When asked if they would use what they learned in the five-part training series, 77 percent of participants responded “definitely yes” (see *Figure 3*).

Figure 2 Relevance to Work

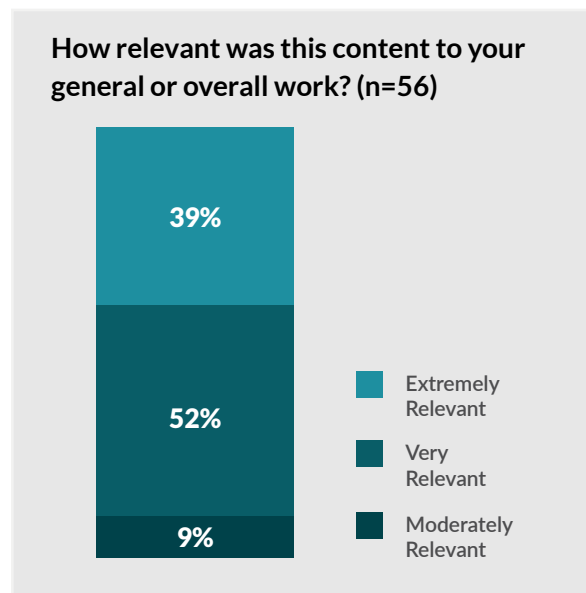
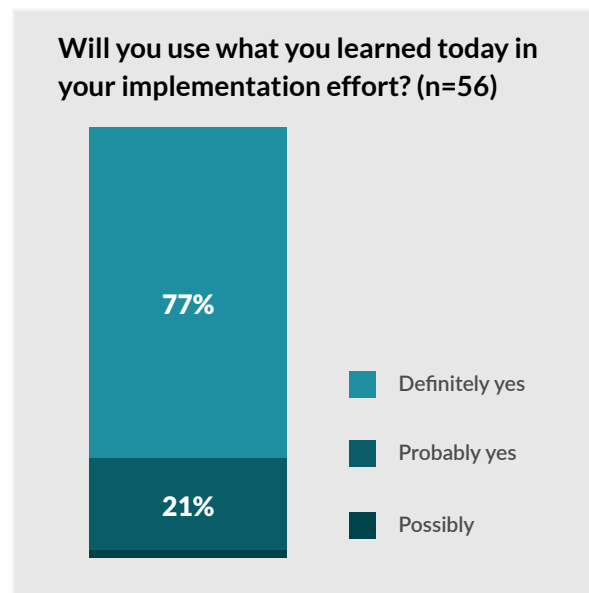


Figure 3 Application of Information



Increase in Knowledge

NCSC surveyed participants before and after the training series to gauge their agreement with statements about applying implementation science concepts. Twenty-five individuals completed the pre-test, and ten completed the post-test. In the pre-test results, participants disagreed with several statements, including:

- “I know how to apply principles of implementation science to my work.”
- “I can describe implementation drivers.”
- “I know how to identify threats to successful implementation and address them in an action plan.”
- “I know how to incorporate coaching and feedback loops into support plans.”

This meant their confidence in applying implementation science concepts was low; however, in the post-test results, no participants disagreed with any of the statements. The three items with the greatest increase in the level of agreement were:

- “I can describe implementation drivers.”
- “I know how to apply principles of implementation science to my work.”
- “I know how to assess whether my court is ready to implement a new policy or practice change.”

Courts’ Readiness to Change

During the ICC, NCSC asked the participants to complete a readiness assessment to identify how prepared their court was to implement their proposed change. Participants frequently rated their courts as having a high level of readiness in terms of collaborating with partners, having support for data collection and reporting, and having an identified champion. Conversely, participants frequently rated their courts as having a low level of readiness in terms of having the resources, the expertise, and the communication plan needed to implement the change. After completing the readiness assessment, the courts reflected on the items they rated at the lowest level of readiness and incorporated research-based implementation strategies into their action plan that mitigate those risks to implementation. One participant noted, “Assessing readiness is a well-designed exercise as it breaks down the very definition of readiness and helps the implementation plan preparation by taking into account all mechanisms, tools, and factors necessary for successful implementation of the new policy.”

Monthly Consultations

Since January 2024, 16 of the 22 courts have been participating in monthly consultations to enhance their understanding and application of PHASE, receive feedback on their implementation plans, and identify solutions to implementation barriers. During the consultations, participants discuss how they have used the implementation strategies presented during the ICC sessions and receive feedback from NCSC staff and other participants on how to address anticipated and unanticipated implementation challenges. They also have an opportunity to share feedback on the efficacy of the ICC and the PHASE framework so that NCSC can continuously improve its usefulness and applicability.

Conclusion

While the field of implementation science is not new, the court community has yet to fully incorporate its lessons into court reform efforts. The PHASE framework and the ICC are two steps forward. The content of the ICC resonated with the participating courts, and the court professionals who attended the sessions took away information they could immediately apply in their work. More than one participating court has reported using the PHASE framework to plan for additional efforts. With the monthly follow-up consultations from NCSC, these courts will continue to receive coaching on implementation strategies to increase the likelihood that their proposed plans are implemented fully and sustained. NCSC is also developing a guidebook for courts on the PHASE framework that will incorporate the worksheets developed for the ICC and lessons learned from the experiences of the ICC sites. The guidebook will be released in fall 2024. Visit www.ncsc.org/phase for more information on PHASE and to see the guidebook when it is released (also at <https://perma.cc/B92E-R7TY>).

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