The Development and Experiences of Character Development Learning Institute Implementation Teams

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Efforts to implement new policies, programs, or practices can be challenging, especially when the individuals leading or implementing the changes must juggle multiple responsibilites—as is often the case in nonprofit organizations. When the YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) launched the Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI; see textbox below for more information), the organization required that participating local YMCAs (Ys) establish implementation teams to guide their CDLI efforts.

The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN), a leader in implementation science, describes implementation teams as core groups of individuals with expertise to guide the planning and implementation of a new policy, program, or practice. Implementation teams are tasked with four phases of work: exploring and identifying strategies to address problems, installing the systems necessary to put those strategies into practice, initiating the first phase of implementation, and completing full implementation following an assessment of the first phase. Such work often requires three years or more to reach full implementation. Implementation teams develop a specific plan for delivering an initiative or program within a specific context and setting, and actively monitor that plan and address challenges in a timely manner.

About the CDLI

In 2016, the YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) developed the Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI) to enhance youth character development-focused adult practices among youth development workers throughout the YMCA (or Y) movement. Adult practices include staff members' small, day-to-day interactions with young people, but the CDLI also focused on hiring, training, and pedagogical approaches. Y-USA chose to focus on the professional development of adults working at local Ys because youth character is deeply influenced by interactions with adults. The five domains of focus were emotion management, empathy, personal development, relationship-building, and responsibility. Via its wide reach, the CDLI had the opportunity to change how social and emotional learning was addressed at the Y. Specifically, over four years and through engagement with hundreds of YMCAs across the nation, the CDLI reached thousands of participants, prompting a positive self-assessed change in 96 percent of staff and volunteers in youth development programs.

To support implementation teams, Y-USA provided Ys with several tools to guide the implementation process and offered ongoing support by assigning Ys to one of two different models: peer support or a Y-USA technical advisor (see *5 Things to Know About the Y-USA's Peer-Supported Technical Assistance Model* and *5 Things to Know About the CDLI Guided Sites* for more information about each model). This brief describes the role of implementation teams and summarizes the experiences of local Ys—both positive and negative—in using this approach during their participation in the CDLI. While these experiences were part of a Y-USA initiative, we expect that some challenges and lessons learned may be instructive to other organizations seeking to implement new policies, programs, or practices.

CDLI Implementation Teams

Local Ys participating in the CDLI reported different approaches to establishing implementation teams to address their unique needs. Below, we present lessons learned that are, in part, a product of that variation. However, we also identified common themes across Ys in how they leveraged their implementation teams.

- **It can be a challenge for implementation teams to balance big-picture thinking with the need to support day-to-day implementation logistics.** Most implementation teams would have liked to spend more time thinking about the big-picture implications of their work and sustainability. However, they felt that the short timeline limited the amount of time they could dedicate to planning and led them to spend the majority of their time focusing on logistics (such as allocating funds and supporting frontline staff and volunteers).

- **A clear understanding of an implementation team's role at the outset of a project can help ensure that the right people are recruited.** Some implementation team members were confused about their roles at the outset of the CDLI. These teams noted that they would have liked more concrete early guidance that specified their responsibilities and identified best practices for effective implementation teams. Specifically, this guidance or training should highlight the responsibilities of implementation teams throughout the implementation process to help determine who should be on the team. Resources that detail the process of establishing implementation teams and identifying members—including an easy-to-use [implementation team checklist](#) to monitor implementation progress—can be found on [NIRN's Active Implementation Hub](#).

- **Engaging executive leadership takes effort but ultimately enhances buy-in and streamlines approvals.** Although many teams struggled to actively engage executive leadership in CDLI activities, those that did observed that leadership involvement helped obtain organizational buy-in and support for CDLI efforts. They also noted that executive leaders brought valuable expertise and experience. A few sites reported that the active participation of C-Suite members (i.e., executive leaders) on their implementation team helped streamline implementation changes when needed. This shows that leadership is instrumental in the change management process because they [support staff and organization functioning and help sustain](#) new programs and initiatives.

- **Repurposing existing teams for new implementation work can be challenging.** CDLI implementation teams were often created from groups that previously existed in order to meet tight timelines for the CDLI. However, implementation team members noted that it was often challenging to fully change the purpose of a pre-existing team to focus solely on CDLI implementation.

- **The frequency of implementation team meetings appears linked to members' perceptions of effectiveness.** Implementation teams that met monthly or more often reported feeling effective and satisfied with their CDLI program's progress. However, as implementation progressed, meeting frequency changed depending on the program's needs and to allow core team members to hold informal check-ins between the larger scheduled implementation team meetings. In general, [regular communication among implementation team members appeared critical](#) to ensuring effective implementation throughout the project.

The overall experience of Ys participating in the CDLI was that members of implementation teams must be engaged early and throughout the process for teams to be optimally effective. The Y-USA's lessons learned from sites' experiences developing implementation teams can be useful to those looking to implement programs. Child Trends' [video series on building evidence for effective programs](#) provides practical guidance and resources for programs seeking to become evidence-based. In addition, NIRN's [Active Implementation Hub](#) includes online modules, trainings, and resources that aim to support organizations or programs interested in building capacity to implement new programs and practices like the CDLI. These resources can support programs as they develop implementation teams that support program implementation.