

Changing Practice in Juvenile Probation: Leadership at All Levels

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Overview

Implementing a research-informed approach to juvenile probation can have significant payoff. Aligning juvenile probation policies and practices with research could increase success rates and public safety, promote more efficient use of resources, and improve outcomes for the hundreds of thousands of youth on probation supervision each year. This fact sheet is part of a [set of resources](#) to help juvenile probation agencies and officers adopt a research-informed approach to supervision, an approach grounded in the best information available about [effective programs and practices](#).

Leading Change

Leaders set the tone for everything within an organization, including a change effort. Strong and supportive leadership is critical for making successful changes – large and small – to the way things are done. Research shows that leaders at all levels are important for initiating and sustaining change. Key responsibilities of leadership include the following:

- Communicating a clear vision and demonstrating commitment to change
- Anticipating and addressing challenges
- Outlining goals and timelines
- Engaging with external stakeholders
- Allocating resources to the change process, including staff time

Create a Coherent Vision for Leaders at All Levels

Research suggests that it is important to ensure leaders throughout the organization agree on the values, goals, and vision for the change effort and are communicating the same messages to staff throughout the organization. This includes mid-level leadership and supervisors. To that end, it can be helpful to:

- Ensure leaders fully understand the change, its purpose, and its benefits before initiating a change effort
- Identify an internal project director or program champion and ensure staff are clear about who that person is

Demonstrate Commitment to the Change Effort

It is important to demonstrate commitment to the change effort through actions and words at each phase. The literature suggests a range of strategies for demonstrating commitment:

- Deliver on promises for resources
- Communicate rationale, purpose, vision and progress, clearly and consistently
- Investigate what strategies are succeeding and what could be improved
- Provide staff with training and other supports, and adjust as needed
- Respond to mistakes with collaborative problem-solving

Generate and Sustain Staff Enthusiasm

Fostering staff buy-in is important for any successful implementation effort. The literature suggests a range of strategies for generating and sustaining staff enthusiasm:

- Engage with frontline staff and acknowledge the complexity of their jobs
- Seek insights from frontline staff and engage them in decisionmaking
- Select frontline staff to serve in leadership roles or serve as change champions

Create Communication Pathways Up and Down the Chain of Command

In any typical organization, more attention is usually given to strategies for ensuring staff know what the leadership wants them to do. Organizations could not run without this kind of communication. Many studies reference the importance of improving the *upward flow of information* to help leaders learn sooner about whether their communications have resulted in the changes they expected and how they can improve them as a means of improving staff buy-in and morale. Strategies for supporting bidirectional communication include:

- Ensuring easy access to digestible information
- Providing staff with opportunities to engage in problem-solving and to vent frustrations
- Transmitting messages through multiple channels e.g. emails, verbal announcements, reports
- Communicating roles, responsibilities, and expectations



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “LEADERSHIP”?

We reference leadership throughout this handbook, and “leadership” can pertain to staff at multiple levels of an organization. In some localities, probation is a local service, whereas in others, it is administered at the state level; in still others there are both local and state oversight functions. Typically, when we reference leadership, we mean probation administrators, agency directors, and deputies. But changing the way organizations function requires leaders at multiple levels of the organization to strongly support the change effort.⁶¹ Leaders at each level play a key role in the change effort. Those levels and roles can include the following:

- State probation administrators, agency directors, and deputies
 - Key tasks: define and communicate the vision; demonstrate consistent commitment to change; generate staff buy-in and enthusiasm; promote change throughout the broader system and community; develop system for continuous quality improvement.
- Supervisors and mid-level managers
 - Key tasks: promote staff buy-in; facilitate policy and practice changes; facilitate bidirectional communication between agency leaders and line staff; identify challenges and propose solutions to address them.
 - Research suggests that the important leadership roles that supervisors and mid-level managers can play are often overlooked (30 of the sources we reviewed mentioned important roles they play). As those who work closest with the frontline staff, they are the best positioned to regularly provide encouragement and support to the staff, and to observe challenges that need to be reported to upper-level management to be addressed at a systems level. Because they liaise between organizational leaders and frontline staff, they can serve either as a critical bridge that facilitates bidirectional communication or as a roadblock that inhibits it.
- Frontline staff
 - Key tasks: enact changes to policy and practice; provide support and peer coaching; provide feedback to promote continuous quality improvement.