Considering Sustainability in our Implementation Plans

Why focus on sustainability?

Approximately 50% of organizational and system change fails to be sustained.

How do you define sustainability?

Defining sustainability can be challenging, as it is considered both an outcome (are we delivering and maintaining the intervention/program activities) and a process (are we adapting and continuously monitoring and adjusting so that sustainment is possible) (1). General consensus is that continuing to implement and maintain program activities and adapting to improve performance over time are components of the sustainability definition (1).

When is a good time to plan for sustainability?

Planning for sustainability starts at the very beginning when you're first preparing to implement your intervention. Or, at the least, once a change or an implementation strategy is starting to look successful, that is a good time to plan for sustainability.

What can we do to increase the likelihood of sustainability?

The following sustainability strategies are taken from Molfenter and colleagues (2) and Maher and colleagues (3). You will note that although sustainability is often one of the "later" stages of implementation models and processes, many of these steps are done in the early stages of planning and delivery of an evidence-based innovation (EBI). *See the resources below for specific tools and resources to assist you in identifying and reflecting on factors such as these in your sustainability planning and process.*

Demonstrating effectiveness: Effectiveness is first demonstrated by citing the evidence for the evidence-based innovation (EBI). Then, and very important to building sustainability capital, is documenting the positive impact of the EBI on the setting where it was implemented. This positively impacts patients, the community, the workforce, the organization, and payers. The positive impact on the organization is often needed for administrative support, patients for clinical support, and the workforce for staff support.

Resource support: Are resources needed to sustain changes made? If yes, develop policy and strategy to maintain those resources. Resources can be in the form of training dollars, staff positions, needed supplies, etc. For sustainability, the fewer resources needed, the better. However, if they are, be sure to plan for it.

Staff buy-in: Include staff in a meaningful way in the change process. Then, as you enter the sustainability phase of the change effort, have staff describe the strengths of and concerns with the change effort. Make sure the strengths are enhanced and concerns addressed.

Monitor progress over time: Develop a method to measure the progress of the changes made. Make sure the data is collected and someone is assigned to monitor it.

Sustain leader: Assign someone who will monitor the change's progress over time and can take action if the EBI is being de-implemented or performance is reverting back to pre-change performance.

Sustainability plan: Have a plan for what will be done if the system begins to go back into patterns before the EBI was implemented. What actions will the Sustain Leader take? Who will convene? What leadership can assist? Etc.

Share your thoughts here

What are some ways you can work with your team to plan for sustainability now?

Share your thoughts here

What tools and resources will you use?

Do you want to check out how your team is doing when it comes to sustainability?
Consider checking out some sustainability-oriented assessments, tools, or evaluations early on. Understanding and addressing your organization's capacity for sustainability and identifying areas for improvement early in the preparation process can help with sustainability later.

Do you want to learn more about sustainability tools and assessments?

- The Center for Implementation's free resources on sustainability planning: https://thecenterforimplementation.com/toolbox/solutions-for-sustainability-planning

- The Program Sustainability Assessment Tool (PSAT) is a free resource to help you rate and understand your organization's capacity for sustainability and identify areas for improvement: sustaintool.org

- The Long-Term Success Tool (LTST) includes 12 factors related to sustainability over time. Read more and find a free download of the evaluation tool at https://thecenterforimplementation.com/toolbox/solutions-for-sustainability-planning

- The EPIS Framework contains a sustainment phase. Check out the website for additional information and resources specific to the sustainment construct as well as measures to assess components of sustainment, such as the Program Sustainability Index.

Additional References and Resources:

(1) Lennox, L., Maher, L., & Reed, J. (2018). Navigating the sustainability landscape: a systematic review of sustainability approaches in healthcare. Implementation Science, 13(1), 1-17.

(2) Molfenter, T., Ford, J. H., & Bhattacharya, A. (2011). The development and use of a model to predict sustainability of change in healthcare settings. International journal of information systems and change management, 5(1), 22-35.

(3) Maher, L., Gustafson, D., & Evans, A. (2007). Sustainability: model and guide. NHS institute for innovation and improvement.