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Best Practices for Technical Assistance: What Does the Evidence Tell Us?

by Mary Maley

The quality of youth programming depends largely on a well-trained, well-supported staff. To bridge the gap between evidence and practice, it is often necessary to provide training and technical assistance that build staff competencies in program content and implementation. This article describes what we know about best practices for technical assistance from recent research and practice wisdom.

What do we mean by "technical assistance"?

In the field of youth services, technical assistance (TA) refers to the delivery of program implementation information and skill-building activities to professionals who provide programming to youth. This includes ongoing staff support in individual or group sessions to answer questions and build capacity for effective program delivery. Technical assistance is considered a component of professional development (Lauer, Christopher, Firpo-Triplett, & Buchting, 2014). Typically, TA is provided by program developers or intermediary organizations.

Background: Theory and Research

Adult Learning

Adult learning theory (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011; Lindeman, 1926) suggests that learning activities for adults:

- Value participant expertise
- Connect to participants' needs
- Include time for hands-on practice of new skills
- Use a collaborative rather than authoritative approach

Mary Maley *is an extension associate with the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence and directs the Research Synthesis Project at Cornell University's Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research.*

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According to this theory, adult learning -- particularly in professional development settings such as training and TA -- is most effective when the experience of the learner is integrated into the content and the process is both interactive and paced according to the needs of the individual or group. This practice can be thought of as more of a dialogue rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge from teacher to student.

Evidence Base

Most published literature on best practices for technical assistance has been conducted in the fields of medicine, dentistry, and classroom teaching. In our review, the most relevant research was published in the fields of adult education, intra-professional education, and implementation science.

Effective delivery of technical assistance includes attention to implementation tasks, TA relationships, intervention life cycle, learning processes, and TA facilitation skills.

To describe the components of TA in the field of evidence-based interventions, Katz and Wandersman (2016) conducted a research synthesis of the current evidence base. The review identified the components of TA from three perspectives: **Tasks** (the activities of implementation), **relationships** (the nature of the interaction between the TA provider and the recipient), and **intervention life cycle** (changing needs over the course of an intervention). In addition, the authors highlighted the lack of evaluation and outcome evidence in TA practice, and the need for additional research in the field.

A tool kit produced by Christopher and colleagues for the nonprofit group ETR in 2014 summarized best practices for the effective delivery of technical assistance. Also in 2014, a guide for TA providers in the field of teen pregnancy prevention was published by Fisher and colleagues for Healthy Teen Network. Together, recommendations from these reports align with research and professional expertise of other authors in the field (Hunzicker, 2010; Lauer et al., 2014; Wandersman, Chien, & Katz, 2012). Below we summarize findings in the areas of implementation tasks, TA relationships, the intervention life cycle, learning processes, and TA facilitation skills.

Research Findings: Best Practices and Core Components of Technical Assistance

Effective delivery of technical assistance includes attention to implementation tasks, TA relationships, intervention life cycle, learning processes, and TA facilitation skills.

Implementation Tasks

There are many tasks associated with program delivery, beginning with the planning phase, continuing to the intervention, and concluding with evaluation and continuous quality improvement. Katz and Wandersman (2016) report that TA should be present to support the whole process of program delivery, rather than a more narrow focus on facilitation alone. These tasks include identifying goals; assessing needs, fit, and capacity; planning for program delivery; and evaluating both processes and outcomes.

TA Relationships

Practitioners and researchers alike highlight the collaborative nature of TA relationships (Christopher et al., 2014; Fisher et al., 2014; Hunzicker, 2010; Lauer et al., 2014; Wandersman et al., 2012). Collaborative TA providers value participant expertise, seek to build relationships and trust, and provide supportive and individualized guidance that focuses on increasing practitioner capacity.

Intervention Life Cycle

Experts agree that TA provision should be ongoing, rather than a one-time event, and that the nature of the TA should reflect the needs of the participants and the life cycle of the intervention. Ongoing TA promotes learning and reinforces skills. It includes regular communication through both individual and group meetings, and can be on site, by phone, or in web-based settings (Christopher et al., 2014; Fisher et al., 2014; Hunzicker, 2010; Lauer et al., 2014). TA is more effective when content and method align with the life cycle of the intervention. In early stages the focus should be on organizational capacity building. TA then shifts to innovation-specific capacity building during implementation phases, and then to a focus on stability and sustainability for long-term success (Katz & Wandersman, 2016). The concept of **pro-active TA**, as characterized by Wandersman and colleagues (2012), highlights the need to reach out to provide assistance even before a call for help comes from a practitioner.

Learning Processes

Technical assistance may take many forms to allow learners to absorb and practice new information and skills. Activities that include time for practice support cognitive processing (Christopher et al., 2014) and hands-on learning (Wandersman et al., 2012). Effective TA providers use a variety of strategies to support learning goals, using appropriate language and including diverse perspectives (Fisher et al., 2014). When learning tasks are job embedded and instructionally focused learners can more easily absorb the content and apply it to their own needs (Hunzicker, 2010).

TA Facilitation

Fisher and colleagues (2014) suggest that TA facilitators should have:

- Expertise in the subject area
- Good group observation skills
- Flexibility to respond to evolving participant needs
- Interpersonal integrity to foster relationships and trust
- Project management skills to guide practitioners through all the steps of an intervention

A skilled facilitator can make the difference between effective and ineffective TA.

Conclusion

As the field of evidence-based practice grows, the need for evidence to support best practices in professional training and technical assistance grows along with it. The limited empirical evidence identified by this review underscores the need for rigorous evaluation of technical assistance for practitioners who deliver

interventions to youth. Katz & Wandersman (2016) call for a more systematic delivery and evaluation of TA for greater quality and accountability. Practice-based expertise can contribute significantly to those efforts to strengthen programming for positive youth outcomes. ★

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Bronfenbrenner Center for
Translational Research
Beebe Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14853
t. 607.255.7736
f. 607.255.8562
act4youth@cornell.edu

www.actforyouth.net

www.nysyouth.net

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