Performance Management as a Way to Improve Implementation Efforts: The Power of KIWIs

Melissa A. Alexander
Bradley G. Whitley
Edward R. Cameron
Michael R. Casey
U.S. Probation Office, Middle District of North Carolina

THE LAST DECADE has seen an explosion in community corrections practices that, at least in theory, can contribute to more successful outcomes. However, the field has been plagued with difficulties in implementing these various tools with fidelity and at a scale to truly make a difference. In our own federal system, the two biggest implementation challenges have been the use of risk assessment (at both the pretrial and post-conviction stages) and the use of Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Rearrest (STARR) skills (and other evidence-based interventions) during supervision contacts. Although both the Post Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA) and the Pretrial Risk Assessment (PTRA) are being completed at very high rates, research has shown that the actual use of the information to drive decisions is poor. Regarding STARR, the nationwide usage rate for the first six months of 2020 is a measly 6.8 percent (AO DSS report, June 2020). Of course, in addition to risk assessment and STARR, our system continues to implement many other policies and programs, all of which have been beset by implementation challenges.

We are all aware of the challenges to implementation, including staff buy-in, workload, and many other obstacles. Yet we are still tasked with trying to improve our system by implementing the latest research-based tools. How do we do that? As outlined in the article "Applying Implementation Research to Improve Community Corrections" (Alexander, 2011),

both drivers and stages impact implementation. Drivers are components that interact with one another to promote change and include Staff Competency, Organizational Supports, and Leadership. Stages indicate the various processes needed for successful implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen et al., 2019). For this article, we are focusing on leadership and how performance management can impact both staff competency and organizational supports to help drive implementation efforts.

While the focus of this article is mainly on performance management, we do want to touch on how our understanding of leadership has enhanced our implementation efforts. Despite outward commitment from most of our staff on our EBP initiatives, we still found ourselves getting stuck in unexpected ways. We have been influenced by the Direction-Alignment-Commitment model[1] (Drath et. al., 2008) as a way to help us figure out "where" we were getting stuck. This model focuses on leadership as a social process, where interactions between people create:

1. Direction—agreement on what we are trying to achieve.
2. Alignment—effective coordination and integration of efforts towards the agreed-upon direction.
3. Commitment—making the success of the collective a personal priority.

While we have focused heavily on articulating our "why" when making unit and district decisions, we found the "intent" of our messages was often not having the "intended impact."[2] This is important when you're trying to move managers, officers, and units toward the pursuit of change and new initiatives. In addition to increased focus on intent and impact, we started being more intentional in clearly communicating Direction, to ensure better Alignment, and obtain collective Commitment from our managers and staff. A more intentional focus on communication using intent and impact calibration, and increased use of Direction, Alignment, and Commitment, allowed us to then move forward with performance management as a means to improve implementation.

Performance management has been a challenge for probably as long as there have been organizations, but the past several years have seen an intense focus on the performance evaluation process within the federal government. All agencies struggle with the best way to evaluate performance; pretrial and probation offices are no different in this respect. In our own district, the traditional performance evaluation process was universally disliked, despite the various tweaks we made over the years. We tried having a behaviorally based system to reduce perceived supervisor

---

[1] For a practical read on the DAC model, see https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/make-leadership-happen-2/

[2] For more on intent vs. impact see https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/closing-the-gap-between-intent-and-impact/

judgment/bias, a number range within each category to delineate performance within the "meets" category, shorter evaluations, longer evaluations—you name it! Regardless of the changes, the feedback was usually the same—the evaluations took too long for supervisors to do, staff felt they were unfair or only focused on what was "wrong," and no one felt motivated by the process.

In our quest to find a better way, we stumbled upon two books that completely changed our philosophy on performance management and how to use the process to improve implementation. In *Next Generation Performance Management* (Colquitt, 2017), Alan Colquitt cites numerous reasons why traditional evaluation processes fail, all of which lead to a dislike of the process and demotivation of employees. He notes significant research that suggest the accuracy, reliability, and validity of ratings can be affected by many factors. For example, supervisors can fail to rate employees accurately because of anchoring (giving more weight to the first information received and/ or the most recent information), status quo (once labeled a certain way, hard to change), justifying past choices, seeking information that confirms what they suspect and ignoring information that is inconsistent, and attributing good outcomes to skill and bad outcomes to other circumstances or bad luck. It should be noted that these aren't necessarily "intentional" choices by supervisors; rather, they are more often unconscious biases. Colquitt also provides compelling research suggesting that pay for performance structures don't broadly improve performance or productivity, don't improve retention, and can actually hurt creativity and innovation. Finally, he references Edward Deci's research on intrinsic motivation, focusing on the importance of people's innate needs for Competence (need to gain mastery of tasks and learn different skills), Relatedness (sense of belonging and attachment), Autonomy (feeling in control of their own behaviors and goals), and Purpose (being part of something bigger than themselves). He suggests that focusing performance management on these items will lead to higher motivation and better performance than traditional rating systems. His Performance Management 2.0 philosophy can be summed up with the statement: "give them something worth working for and they will." He further suggests that using direction and context (goals, purpose, meaning) can motivate performance.

Colquitt's focus on goals ties in nicely with the work of John Doerr, as explained in the book *Measure What Matters* (2018). Doerr is a venture capitalist who opens the book with the story of how he came to Google in 1999, when it was still a start-up company. Doerr states that "Ideas are easy. Execution is everything" (p. 6), then goes on to describe how he brought the philosophy of Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) to Google and subsequently to many other companies and non-profit organizations. He describes OKRs this way:

An Objective is simply what is to be achieved, no more and no less. By definition, objectives are significant, concrete, action oriented, and (ideally) inspirational…Key Results benchmark and monitor HOW we get to the objective. Effective KRs are specific and time-bound, aggressive yet realistic. Most of all, they are measurable and verifiable (p .7).

Doerr spends the rest of the book giving practical examples from numerous organizations about how the process of OKRs helped drive their performance. He also provides a process framework for conversations, feedback, and recognition (what he calls CFRs) that help champion transparency, accountability, empowerment, and teamwork. Thus, the process becomes quarterly goal setting, with short 15-minute check-ins every couple of weeks to gauge progress and keep employees on track. All employee goals should be connected to larger unit/district goals, which keeps Direction and Alignment on track.

Given our continued frustration with our evaluation process, we decided to give the concept of OKRs a try. However, we chose to call them KIWIs, an idea developed by the New Zealand company Allbirds. KIWI stands for Keep Improving With Intent. We love the message that this acronym sends – no matter where you are in your position or career, you can improve in some way. This intentional shift from evaluating past behavior/performance to forward-focused performance has been critical. We have been pleasantly surprised to see how moving to this performance management process encouraged a growth mindset (see Carol Dweck's work on this concept) and has helped the district continue to move forward in a number of ways— skill development, specific projects, policy changes—you name it!

What does this process look like in real life? Developing KIWIS first flows from the larger unit/district goals. Once those are agreed upon by management, KIWIs become a collaborative process between the supervisor and employee. The KIWIS should benefit both the staff member and the district and can include both personal and organizational development goals/interests that create alignment with the district's established direction. Objectives may include items such as development of interventions to address dynamic risk factors (organizational), improving the balance of high-risk personal contacts performed in the office and community (personal and organizational), implementing healthy stress management techniques to avoid burnout (personal), increasing leadership visibility among peers (personal), or developing a model for expanded use of the PCRA (organizational). These objectives allow the officer to focus on increasing personal performance while contributing to the organization. The process allows the officer and supervisor to identify areas of interest while considering both personal and organizational needs. Key results are then developed to achieve the objective.

The KIWI process takes the focus of the performance evaluation process away from a scoring and justification system and replaces it with a "coaching" system. During "check-ins" the supervisor and officer discuss progress, understanding, obstacles, and adjustments that need to be made in achieving key results. The supervisor can problem solve, reinforce, and provide feedback on progress toward the key result and ultimately the larger objective. Unlike the traditional performance evaluation process, where supervisors rate and justify an officer's performance, usually annually, the focus is on performance in real time, with an emphasis on professional development and growth. At the end of each quarter, the supervisor and staff member reflect on what was achieved, celebrating successes, understanding missteps/failures, and most importantly focusing on knowledge/skills gained that can be used for future performance. What follows are some practical examples of how moving away from a formal evaluation process to a continuous performance management process has jump-started our implementation efforts in many ways.

A little background on our district. We have been involved in implementing EBP since 2010, when our current chief was appointed. The chief is well-versed in both PCRA and STARR, having been involved in their development while working at the

Administrative Office (AO). We began our EBP journey focused on these two initiatives. While we have had substantial success in implementing them, we still found ourselves struggling at times. We've also struggled with implementing other initiatives, including some innovative work within our presentence unit. Some of this we attributed to staff buy-in and began thinking that it would become "easier" once certain staff had retired. We currently have a tremendous management team, with each of them being well-versed in and committed to EBP, and on the supervision side all of them have expertise and are recognized nationally for their work. Implementation for us should be easy, right? Not so fast.

In this section we'll focus on the role of the deputy chief in the development of our EBP supervision practices. From a deputy chief standpoint, KIWIs have been instrumental in helping with team development, individual development, and mindset change (i.e., unit thinking vs. individual supervisor (SUSPO) and/or office thinking). Our goal was to move our EBP initiatives forward to improve caseload management, change work, and risk management.

Our view of the deputy position has evolved from the traditional "operations" role to a coaching approach that would focus on intentionally growing supervisor knowledge and skills, particularly as they relate to implementation. We are fortunate that our deputy had experience with the AO's Post-Conviction Supervision Working Group and the Federal Judicial Center's Supervising Officers in an Evidence Based Environment Program (SOEBE); in addition, he was focused on bringing the "coaching approach" he used as a SUSPO to the role of the deputy chief. While operational oversight is still critical, equally important is ensuring that supervisors and their teams are focused on growing replacements (e.g., the next chief, deputy chief, or SUSPO) to sustain current practices but also keep them moving forward. Since we had already been involved with EBP for years and now had the "ideal" SUSPO team, we expected this to be "easy" for us; our deputy quickly learned it was not. We realized that despite the SUSPOs' EBP knowledge and commitment, each was still an individual with varying experience, age, challenges, and beliefs. We also needed to focus on building individual relationships with each other, so that we could establish trust within the team before we moved into our individual growth and unit initiatives. To that end, we made clear that our

expectation is for them to be the models of a "Coaching SUSPO." The SUSPO must evolve from the historical compliance-based, policy-knowing, product reviewer, to an active, engaged, innovative, evidence-driven skill developer. For the individual SUSPOs and the team as a whole, the expectation is to embrace this and keep our units and the district moving forward. Following the DAC model noted above, this "Direction" provided the foundation on which we aligned our work.

After providing a vision (Direction), it was time to work on both Alignment and Commitment. While coaching and building the collective mindset required for commitment, we needed to simultaneously coach these SUSPOs to foster their growth and development and somehow find a way to keep our district's innovation and initiatives moving forward. The time was right to implement the use of KIWIs. KIWIs became the tool to bring application and action to our vision and goals to continuously develop staff, improve operations, increase skills, and utilize better practices.

We started by trying to connect individual strengths and interests with the various initiatives we wanted to implement. If used effectively, KIWIs can connect managers and staff to activities that tap into the innate needs noted earlier, growing them personally while also moving unit and district initiatives forward. Below are examples for both supervisor and line officer KIWIs.

Example Supervisor KIWI: EBP "Playbook"

As I'm sure many other districts have experienced, we have implemented numerous interventions over the years, constantly growing the officers' "tool belt" for supervision. After 10 years of pursuing and collecting EBP knowledge and skills, it was time to organize our tool shed. What tools do we have? Are we using them effectively? Do we need to revisit how to use the tool? When do we use one tool versus another in our change work process? When do we introduce the various tools to new staff? What tools/skills do we want to pursue in the future and when? We wanted to provide a structured "playbook" that would help officers connect all the tools into a larger model of effective supervision (notably, it has been a KIWI for the deputy chief to develop this model). The model incorporates caseload management, change work, and risk management. The first assignment was to have a supervisor (one of our early adopters

for STARR and a nationally recognized EBP leader) develop the "change work" section. Playing to strengths and interests, this project was assigned to a SUSPO who is a nationally known EBP practitioner/presenter and faculty for the FJC's SOEBE program. He is a wealth of knowledge and truly enjoys being a player and coach on the front lines of district and national initiatives. Despite his interest and passion for this project, for months he had been "stuck" trying to create the plan for our district with little progress. Once our district implemented the KIWI process, setting Objectives and Key Measures helped the supervisor make progress quickly (see Chart 1, next page). One benefit of the KIWI process was that the playbook was clearly aligned with a larger objective of growing our EBP team's capacity to help teach and share innovation and change work knowledge across the district. The development of the change work playbook became a key result to the larger objective, which helped motivate the supervisor to set aside time to develop our district's playbook or plan. The supervisor also knew that he would be having regular check-ins (every 2–3 weeks) with the deputy chief to discuss his progress. With this new process in place and expectations clearly defined, the playbook began to take shape quickly. What had taken months to get off the ground was now being developed within weeks. The supervisor and deputy chief met not only to discuss progress but also to clarify expectations and calibrate vision alignment. Our district's change work playbook has quickly taken shape and is now being implemented.

Example Officer KIWI: Creation of Worksheets

One intervention we have developed is the Awareness Light, which was created to provide officers with an additional tool to deepen discussions, improve decision-making, and increase awareness of possible risks (peers, relationships, free time, locations, etc.) for individuals under supervision. The intervention had been used by a few officers in our district, but there was room for additional implementation throughout the district. An "early-adopter" officer took on the KIWI of improving implementation of the Awareness Light. The key result was the creation of multiple worksheets. The regular check-ins with the supervisor allowed the officer to discuss her progress, which fueled her creativity and confidence in creating the worksheets. Ultimately, the district will benefit from

worksheets that can assist officers in addressing Dynamic Risk Factors and other risks by providing additional dosage toward positive behavioral change.

Example Officer KIWI: Time Management

Although this article is mainly focused on how KIWIs improve implementation overall, we also want to point out how KIWIs can assist in implementing individual performance needs.

One officer wanted to improve in submitting case plans on time, which is a known struggle for officers locally and nationally. For years prior to our KIWI implementation, the SUSPO and the officer collaborated on a number of failed strategies to improve in this area. Some examples included establishing "quiet" hours, setting mutually agreed-upon deadlines, joint review of various Decision Support System (DSS) reports, and directives. The SUSPO has since recognized that

these strategies failed because they only focused on the outcome, which was to get case plans submitted by their established due date. Implementing KIWIs with this officer required that we meet and determine the "drivers" for why case plans were a struggle. Some obstacles/barriers ("drivers") identified included, "I do not think case plans are that valuable," "I do not have the PCRA(s) updated in time," and "I run out of time before the end of the month." The identified "drivers" allowed us to develop key measures, specific for this officer, to help him improve in meeting deadlines (the overall objective). For this officer, it was not a training deficit or an inability to complete the associated tasks. The key measures developed addressed the root causes of the problem, which moved the officer to better organization, prioritization, time management, and an improved understanding of case plans (thinking more about purpose). The key measures created a plan for the officer (looking ahead) to use various tools to organize and initiate getting the PICTS done at the beginning of the month (previously noted barrier), intentionally schedule time on the officer's calendar to work on case plans (previously noted barrier), review DSS reports bi-weekly (serves as a reinforcer of work already completed and a reminder of work to be completed), and implement coaching/feedback about content to include in the case plan (previously identified barrier about understanding, as the officer was including excessive detail in the case plan, thus losing efficiency). The check-ins provided opportunities to discuss each key measure, progress, and any barriers. As noted in Chart 3, we have also recently incorporated more specific questions in the reflection section, to further encourage understanding and long-term growth.

For the first time ever, the officer has submitted all delinquent and current case plans. More importantly, the officer developed sustainable skills to improve job performance, thus reducing the likelihood of "getting behind" in the future. The officer shared the following:

> I have confidence that the new strategies I have implemented will help me stay on top of it moving forward. I also appreciate [my SUSPO] for pushing me and holding me accountable in order to help me grow.

Finally, we want to provide feedback from staff on what the "real" deal is regarding our

CHART 1.
Example Objective/Key Measures for a KIWI

Objective
Develop EBP team to grow capacity to share innovation within the district

Key Measures
1. Develop Change Work Playbook outline.
2. Identify/solicit STARR coaches for assistance.
3. Meet with prospective team to share vision and start development of implementation plan.

CHART 2.
Example KIWI with End of Quarter Notes

Objective
Improve upon Awareness Light Intervention Implementation and Usefulness

Key Measures
1. Create a rough draft worksheet to supplement officers' use of Awareness Light.
2. Have three officers review and suggest edits of worksheets.
3. Review worksheet progress and finalize worksheet with SUSPO during KIWI meetings.
Wrap-up: For each note whether it was full achieved, partially achieved, modified, abandoned. Also note key lessons learned based on reflection on the goals.

1. Achieved and modified. The USPO has developed a worksheet for use of Awareness Light addressing Social Networks. What she has developed thus far has exceeded all expectations. However, she would like to develop the worksheet further and then create other worksheets for locations, free time, dates/times, etc. USPO also incorporated some elements of behavioral analysis in the worksheet. USPO would like to further develop this KIWI and it will carry over to the next quarter.
2. Achieved and modified. The USPO incorporated the feedback of other officers into her worksheet. The USPO would like to further develop this KIWI. She plans to solicit user feedback from officers outside this satellite office.
3. Achieved. The worksheet has evolved from its inception, and this SUSPO is excited about what USPO has created. She has been able to incorporate elements of behavioral analysis into the worksheet. The worksheet will become a great homework resource and should help officers navigate this intervention. The USPO noted that she approaches the Awareness Light differently and more deliberately now. She noted that the conversation is much more detailed and longer now, which provides additional information into social networks.

CHART 3.
Example KIWI with Reflection Questions

Objective 1
Improve/maintain efficiency in case plans (thus, meeting due dates).

Key Measures
1. Update PICTS/PCRAs in advance by using PACTS action list and automated email generated at the beginning of the month.
2. Intentionally plan time in schedule/calendar during the month to complete case plans.
3. Run DSS Report 1224 bi-weekly to monitor progress in case plan submissions/due dates.
4. Ensure case plan is accurate, but not overly detailed (think about efficiency and purpose).

Second Quarter Reflections (Objective 1)
This objective was: ☐Fully Achieved ☐Partially Achieved ☐Modified ☐Abandoned
Thinking back to your initial conversation with your supervisor about his objective, why was this objective set?
What skills and/or knowledge was developed from this objective?
How will these skills/knowledge transfer into other areas of your work and self-development?
Were there any challenges or difficulties faced in pursuing this objective? If so, how did you navigate those?
What did you find rewarding in pursuing this objective?

new performance management process. This next section is a supervisor's perspective on KIWIs:

As I approach my mid-career point working for the U.S. Probation Office, I have reflected on my personal and professional growth, or lack thereof, over the last 11 years. One thing that stands out is the fact that I have "endured" a lot (I mean, a lot) of different performance evaluations over the years, but the results did not vary. No matter what tool we used, or revisions made to the evaluation instrument, my performance, motivation, and feedback remained the same. To me, this suggests that the former evaluations merely affirmed that I was a "good" worker and was doing my job but did not influence my future potential. There was little to no direction for forward thinking about personal and professional development. Instead of looking back, we should have been looking ahead to foster creativity and growth. We needed more than a new tool. Instead, we needed a new mindset and process that provided a roadmap, which aligned with our district goals.

Admittedly, when the KIWI concept was initially introduced, I was a little reluctant, thinking, here we go again…another performance evaluation. I could not have been more wrong. The KIWI process is so much more and given the successes I've observed, I believe that the formal scoring, ratings, and underappreciated text and data of previous evaluations are history in our district.

As a middle manager, I have been on both sides of the KIWI conversation, as a subordinate employee and as a supervisor. As a direct report to our deputy chief, I participate in the collaborative process of establishing objectives and key measures related to job performance, district initiatives, focused coaching efforts with subordinates, leadership, and self-development. The deputy chief and I established two KIWI objectives specific to larger district initiatives: 1) Re-vamp our Evidence Based Practices Discussion Group (program and curriculum) for new hires; and 2) Develop a Caseload Management "Playbook" for our district. Specific key measures were established for each objective, designed to get me started, engaged, and moving toward the final objectives. In the first quarter (90 days), I was able to accomplish each key measure in re-vamping our curriculum, ultimately completing the project. The KIWI process was beneficial because I was able to "chunk out" smaller action items into achievable pieces, which felt "good" to discuss (and celebrate) with my supervisor during periodic check-ins. The check-ins focused more on the front windshield than what was in the rear-view mirror. The check-ins also supported our "coaching" culture. The specificity of the KIWI process held me accountable (motivated me), yet still allowed for creativity in how and when I would complete the tasks. Since establishing the objectives and key measures was collaborative, I had buy-in. As to the second KIWI objective, I took an idea that has been circulated for several years now, and in 90-120 days, helped grow the concept into fruition, a tangible product. Again, having specific key measures helped move me towards the larger goal. Every 2-3 weeks, I met with my supervisor to discuss progress and barriers, which I found helpful and rewarding. Remarkably, since abandoning our previous evaluation system and implementing our new KIWI process, I am still a "good" employee. The difference now is that in addition to being a "good" employee, I pushed myself to accomplish two larger district objectives and am already focused on what's next.

As with anything, this process continues to evolve for us, but we have been extremely pleased with how this process has not only improved implementation but also improved our evaluation process overall. Both line staff and supervisors report finding this process much more motivating and satisfying. If this model intrigues you, we highly recommend reading both Alan Colquitt and John Doerr's books. We spent several months as a management team discussing the concepts and figuring out what they would look like in practical terms in our office and encourage you to do the same. Finally, we are always available to help anyone who decides to follow us on this journey.

References

Alexander, M. (2011). Applying implementation research to improve community corrections: Making sure that "new thing" sticks! *Federal Probation, 75*(2).

Colquitt, A. (2017). *Next generation performance management: The triumph of science over myth and superstition.* Information Age Publishing, Inc., Charlotte, NC.

Doerr, J. (2018). *Measure what matters. How Google, Bono, and the Gates Foundation rock the world with OKRs.* Penguin, New York, NY.

Drath, W. H., McCauley, C. D., Paulus, C. J., Velsor, E. V., O'Connor, P. M. G, & Maguire, J. B. (2008). Direction, alignment, commitment: Toward a more integrative ontology of leadership. *Leadership Quarterly* (19), 635-653.

Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature.* National Implementation Research Network, University of South Florida, www.activeimplementation.org.

Fixsen, D. L., Blase, K. A., & Van Dyke, M. K. (2019). *Implementation practice and science* (1st ed.). Chapel Hill, NC: Active Implementation Research Network.

Lovins, B. K., Cullen, F. T., Latessa, E. J., & Jonson, C. L. (2018). Probation officer as a coach: Building a new professional identity, *Federal Probation 82*(1).