3. Best practice

A best practice is a method or technique that has consistently shown results superior to those achieved with other means, and that is used as a benchmark. In addition, a "best" practice can evolve to become better as improvements are discovered. Best practice is considered by some as a business buzzword, used to describe the process of developing and following a standard way of doing things that multiple organizations can use.

Best practices are used to maintain quality as an alternative to mandatory legislated standards and can be based on self-assessment or benchmarking. Best practice is a feature of accredited management standards such as ISO 9000 and ISO 14001.

Some consulting firms specialize in the area of Best Practice and offer pre-made 'templates' to standardize business process documentation. Sometimes a "best practice" is not applicable or is inappropriate for a particular organization's needs. A key strategic talent required when applying best practice to organizations is the ability to balance the unique qualities of an organization with the practices that it has in common with others.

Good operating practice is a strategic management term. More specific uses of the term include good agricultural practices, good manufacturing practice, good laboratory practice, good clinical practice and good distribution practice.

3.1 Best Practices Theory in Public Policy

Best Practice is a form of program evaluation in public policy. It is the process of reviewing policy alternatives that have been effective in addressing similar issues in the past and could be applied to a current problem. Determining "Best" or "Smart" Practices to address a particular policy problem is a commonly used but little understood tool of analysis because the concept is vague and should therefore be examined with caution.

Eugene Bardach provides the following theoretical framework in his book A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis, Eightfold Path (policy analysis) for "best" or "smart" practices:

3.1.1 Develop Realistic Expectations

Bardach advises the policy analyst that it is important to maintain realistic expectations when seeking a "best practice" in public policy analysis because the practice may not be solving the problem at all and it may instead produce unfavorable results. Because a practice seems to be tailored to a specific policy problem and also based on solid research, it does not necessarily mean it is creating good results. However the research can produce thought-provoking concepts on what can and can not work when put into practice.

3.1.2 Analyze Smart Practices

In policy analysis a "best" or "smart" practice is a clear and concrete behavior that solves a problem or achieves a goal. Smart practices take "advantage" of an idle opportunity at a low cost and little risk. Eugene Bardach refers to this as finding the free lunches. These are opportunities for creative policy improvements such as "cost-based pricing" or "input substitution" that have the possibility to generate public value at a very low cost. Breaking loose from conventions and challenging assumptions can also be way to take advantage of an idle opportunity. An example of this is the highly controversial practice of the government contracting out a community good or service to nonprofits or the private sector. This challenges the assumption that a community good or service must be financed through taxation and delivered by government employees.

3.1.3 Observe the Practice

The primary mechanism in a "smart" practice is the ability or the means of achieving a goal in a cost-effective manner. The secondary mechanisms include implementing features, supportive features and optional features. It can be very complicated to separate between the functions in getting the mechanism to work and the features that support those functions.

Bardach recommends when adapting smart practices for another source, it is important to identify the core essence of the practice while allowing flexibility for how it is implemented so it remains sensitive to local conditions. Robust smart practices are adaptable to various conditions, have many operational features, and can employ similar but diverse ways to achieve their goals.

3.1.4 Describe Generic Vulnerabilities

In addition to the reasons why a smart practice might succeed, an analyst should describe potential vulnerabilities that could lead a smart practice to fail—these weaknesses are "generic vulnerabilities". Two types of vulnerabilities are worth particular attention: 1) poor general management capacity, which makes it more difficult to effectively implement a smart practice, and 2) weaknesses inherent to the practice itself. Policymakers must develop safeguards in order to minimize the risk of generic vulnerabilities.

3.1.5 But Will It Work Here?

The final step in identifying an appropriate "best practice" for a policy problem is to ensure that the context from which the practice is derived is comparable to the context in which it will be applied. Risks to implementing the selected "best practice" in the applied context as well as what support structures can be put in place need to be anticipated in order to maximize the likelihood of success. If utilizing a pilot or demonstration program "best practice" the success of that practice needs to be discounted in order to account for the better than average favorable conditions pilot and demonstration programs usually operate under. These conditions include increased enthusiasm, advantageous political and economic conditions, and less bureaucratic resistance due to the lack of permanency in pilot programs. Finally, when considering implementing a "best practice" on a wide scale one must be aware of the 'weakest link' sites with minimal to no resources and how those sites will be supported in order to create the desired policy outcomes.

3.1.6 Back to the Eightfold Path

Excessive optimism about the expected impact of untested smart practices is a common critique. If a current practice is known to be ineffective, implementing a promising alternative after weighing the alternatives may be worth the risk.

3.1.7 Examples of "Best/Smart" Practice Evaluation in Public Policy

There are many examples of the use of "best"/"smart" practice evaluations in Public Policy.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) produces a document called The Clean Energy-Environment Guide to Action. It is designed to share successful state "best practices" to determine what is most suitable for them to use in generating clean energy policies and programs. The guide includes 16 clean energy policies and

programs that offer opportunities for states to save energy, improve air quality, lower greenhouse gas emission and increase economic development.

An example of a successful "best practice" from the guide is "Building Codes for Energy Efficiency". This practice is to use building energy codes to set requirements that establish a minimum level of energy efficiency standards for residential and commercial buildings. California Energy Code Title 24 is one "best practice" that is highlighted in this guide. The following points for energy code implementation is to educate and train key audiences, supply the right resources, and to provide budget and staff for the program.

Eugene Bardach has a list of "smart" practice candidates in his book A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis, Eightfold Path (policy analysis). One example is the tutoring program for children in grades 1-3 called Reading One-to-One. The program from Texas includes one on one tutoring with supervision and simple structured instruction in phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is one highly regarded predictor of how well a child will learn to read in the first two years of school. The program takes advantage of the fact that many children, especially ESL students, fail in reading because it is very hard for second language students to understand and pronounce sounds in English. The program is easily duplicated at a relatively low cost because of the straight forward teaching materials, systematic methods and administrative oversight.

In September 2013 at the New York State Conference for Mayors and Municipal Officials, successes, ideas and information on "best" practices were shared among government peers. A "best" practice that was highlighted at the conference was how Salinas, California is rebuilding their economy by engaging technology companies with their agricultural business in order to grow jobs. Salinas is taking advantage of an idle opportunity. The area already has abundant lettuce fields and now the city is marketing itself as a lab for agricultural technology. This public/private partnership includes a new nonprofit called the Steinbeck Innovation Foundation to increase investment in new technologies to help the area's agricultural industry.

3.2 Use of Best Practices in Health and Human Services

In recent years, public agencies and non-governmental organizations have been exploring and adopting best practices when delivering health and human services. In these settings, the use of the terms "promising practices", "best practices", and "evidence-based practices" is common and often confusing as there is not a general consensus on what constitutes promising practices or best practices. In this context,

the use of the terms "best practices" and "evidence-based practices" are often used interchangeably. Evidence-based practices are methods or techniques that have documented outcomes and ability to replicate as key factors.

Despite these challenges, literature suggests that there is some common use of and criteria for identifying best practices. For example, a general working definition used by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in referring to a promising practice is defined as one with at least preliminary evidence of effectiveness in small-scale interventions or for which there is potential for generating data that will be useful for making decisions about taking the intervention to scale and generalizing the results to diverse populations and settings.

Since evidence of effectiveness, potential for taking the intervention to scale and generalizing the results to other populations and settings are key factors for best practices, the manner in which a method or intervention becomes a best practice can take some time and effort. The table below demonstrates the process for a promising practice to achieve the status of research validated best practice.

Research Validated Best Practice A program, activity or strategy that has the highest degree of proven effectiveness supported by objective and comprehensive research and evaluation.

Field Tested Best Practice A program, activity or strategy that has been shown to work effectively and produce successful outcomes and is supported to some degree by subjective and objective data sources.

Promising Practice A program, activity or strategy that has worked within one organization and shows promise during its early stages for becoming a best practice with long term sustainable impact. A promising practice must have some objective basis for claiming effectiveness and must have the potential for replication among other organizations.

The National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP) (External Link: http://nrepp.samhsa.gov) is a searchable online registry of interventions supporting substance abuse prevention and mental health treatment that have been reviewed and rated by independent reviewers. NREPP accepts submissions for interventions that meet minimum requirements to be considered for review. Minimum requirements include (1) demonstration of one or more positive outcomes among individuals, communities, or populations; (2) evidence of these outcomes has been demonstrated in at least one study using an experimental or quasi-

experimental design; (3) the results of these studies have been published in a peer-reviewed journal or other professional publication, or documented in a comprehensive evaluation report; and (4) implementation materials, training and support resources, and quality assurance procedures have been developed and are ready for use by the public. NREPP is not an exhaustive list of interventions and inclusion in the registry does not constitute an endorsement.

There is existing controversy about the lack of culturally appropriate evidence-based best practices and the need to utilize a research-based approach to validate interventions. Some communities have deployed practices over a long period of time that has produced positive outcomes as well as a general community consensus to be successful. CRDP intends to improve access, quality of care, and increase positive outcomes for racial, ethnic and cultural communities. These communities have been identified as (1) African American, (2) Asian/Pacific Islanders, (3) Latinos, (4) Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Questioning, and (5) Native Americans. Strategic Planning Workgroups composed of mental health providers and community members as well as consumers and family members are given the task of identifying new approaches toward reducing disparities. The five Strategic Planning Workgroups work to identify new service delivery approaches defined by multicultural communities for multicultural communities using community-defined evidence to improve outcomes and reduce disparities. Community- defined evidence is defined as "a set of practices that communities have used and determined to yield positive results as determined by community consensus over time and which may or may not have been measured empirically but have reached a level of acceptance by the community." (Reference: National Latina/o Psychological Association, Fall/Winter 2008, National Network to Eliminate Disparities in Behavioral Health, SAMHSA, and CMHS, Larke Nahme Huang, Ph.D).

3.3 Best Practice in Action

3.3.1 Clean Air Financing Programs

This is a quick guide put together by the NGA Center for Best Practices. It explores what clean air programs currently exist and how they are being financed. Rather than stating one best practice to tackling clean air, this report creates a table of the different programs, how they are being financed, and in what state. Governors and their staffs can then look for characteristics and solutions that are most realistic and applicable to their situation. The key is to tailor current practices that are in the world

to the specific situation you are looking to solve. Best practices are meant to give insight into existing strategies.

3.3.2 Environmental best management practice

The concept of best practice has been employed extensively in environmental management. For example, it has been employed in aquaculture such as recommending low-phosphorus feed ingredients, in forestry to manage riparian buffer zones, in livestock and pasture management to regulate stocking rates, and in particular, best management practices have been important to improving water quality relating to nonpoint source pollution of fertilizers in agriculture as well as the identification and adoption of best practice for controlling salinity. However, in the context of complex environmental problems such as dryland salinity, there are significant challenges in defining what is best in any given context. Best management practice for complex problems is context specific and often contested against a background of imperfect knowledge. In these contexts, it is more useful to think of best management practice as an adaptive learning process rather than a fixed set of rules or guidelines. This approach to best practice focuses on fostering improvements in quality and promoting continuous learning.

3.3.3 Higher Education

The NGA has identified science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as important skills that need to be developed in community colleges in order to create a strong work force. Many states are creating or have created STEM Programs to address this issue. In order for these programs to work governors should:

"Engage business to help ensure that community colleges meet regional STEM-skill needs

Use community colleges to support new models of STEM education

Reward community colleges and students for STEM course-completion

Ensure that community colleges support more effective mathematics remediation

Require that community college STEM credits and credentials are transferable."

3.3.4 Health and Human Services

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) makes evidence-based recommendations on clinical preventive services. The Task Force recommendations are based on systematic reviews and assessment of the available medical evidence. USPSTF Webpage.

The San Francisco Public Health Department conducted The Transgender Best Practices Guide project, a best practices document for cultural and service competency in working with transgender clients within HIV/AIDS service-provision settings. Following an intensive literature search and consumer focus group, a Working Group composed of noted community leaders; activists, professionals, and transgender consumers participated in the development of the Best Practices guide. Topics covered by the Best Practices guide include mental health issues; gender identity; hormone use and clinical care practices. The Best Practices guide is currently in production; it will be published and distributed to EMA providers, as well as to select organizations nation-wide. In addition, four large-scale EMA provider trainings will be provided to educate providers on the Best Practices recommendations and standard measures. This is the first national federally funded effort to develop a Best Practices guide for providers who serve the HIV positive transgender community.

3.3.5 Charity / Nonprofit Sector

The nonprofit/voluntary sector is generally lacking tools for sharing and accessing best practices. Steps are being taken in some parts of the world, for example in the European Union, where the Europe 2020 Strategy has as a top priority the exchange of good practices and networking (including the nonprofit sector).

An initiative of sharing good practices in terms of human resources (HR) and leadership among European nonprofit organizations was financed by the EU and launched in 2013, called HR Twinning. The platform allows the public to search for good practices and its members the possibility to share their practices, engage in discussions in the forum section and enroll their organization. Membership is free. The project is currently limited to a European audience.

3.4 Other best practices domains

Best practices are used in nearly every industry and professional discipline. Areas of note include information technology development, such as new software, but also in construction, transportation, business management, sustainable development and various aspects of project management. Best practices are also used in healthcare to deliver high-quality care that promotes best outcomes. Best practices are used within business areas including sales, manufacturing, teaching, computer programming, road construction, health care, insurance and public policy.

3.5 Critique

There are some criticisms of the term "best practice." Eugene Bardach claims that the work necessary to deem and practice the "best" is rarely done. Most of the time, one will find "good" practices or "smart" practices that offer insight into solutions that may or may not work for a given situation.

Scott Ambler challenges the assumptions that there can be a recommended practice that is best in all cases. Instead, he offers an alternative view, "contextual practice," in which the notion of what is "best" will vary with the context. Similarly, Cem Kaner and James Bach provide two scenarios to illustrate the contextual nature of "best practice" in their article. In essence, such critiques are consistent with the contingency theory, which was developed during the 1950s and 1960s.