



# NASCS

National Association for State Community Services Programs

## Fostering Peer Learning through Collaborative Networks

Strategies to support learning and  
application of knowledge

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**2025**  
**WINTER**  
**TRAINING**  
**CONFERENCE**

"BUILDING TOWARDS TOGETHER"

[www.nascsp.org](http://www.nascsp.org)

# Learning Objectives: Why do we need “peer learning?”

- Meet the challenges of increasing capacity of the network
- Break the cycle of getting repeated requests for training about the same topic
- Explore barriers and celebrate success
- Improve application of knowledge to improve results



Effectively identifying the need

# The Results Oriented Management and Accountability Cycle

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## **Assessment**

Needs and Resources



## **Evaluation**

Analyze data,  
compare with  
benchmarks



## **Planning**

Use assessment data and  
agency mission statement  
to identify results, and  
strategies



## **Achievement of Results**

Observe and report  
progress

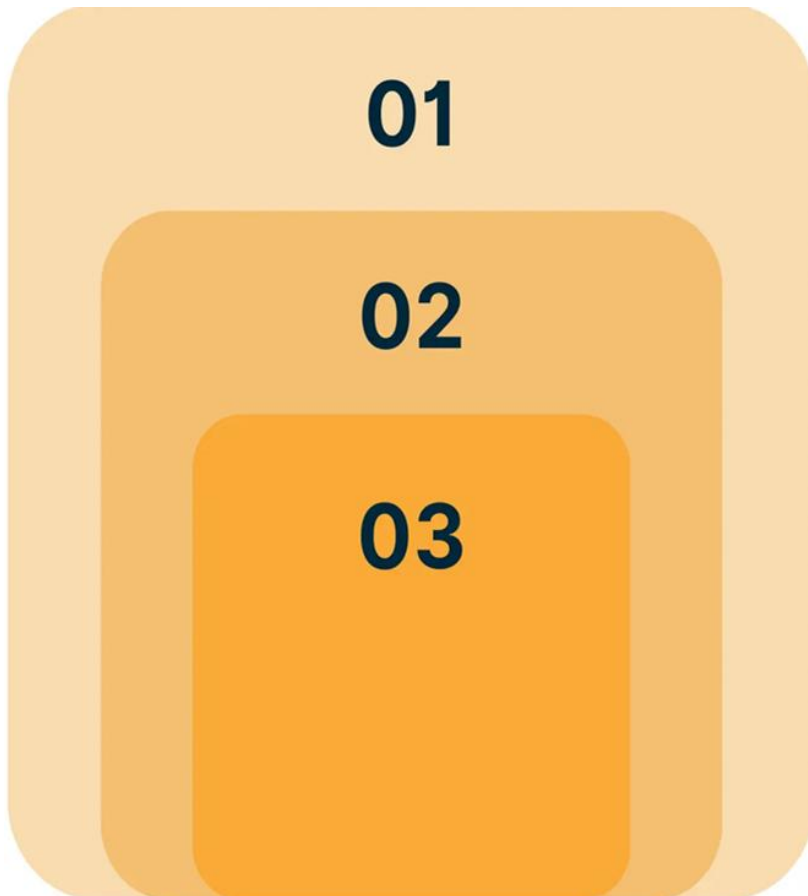


## **Implementation**

Strategies and  
services



# Professional Development directed to multiple levels of network needs



## Organizational Level

**01**

Evaluates the company's strategic goals to determine where training can enhance overall performance.

## Occupational Level

**02**

Identifies the specific skills and knowledge needed for effective performance in particular job roles.

## Individual Level

**03**

Assesses each employee's unique training needs based on their performance, feedback, and career goals.



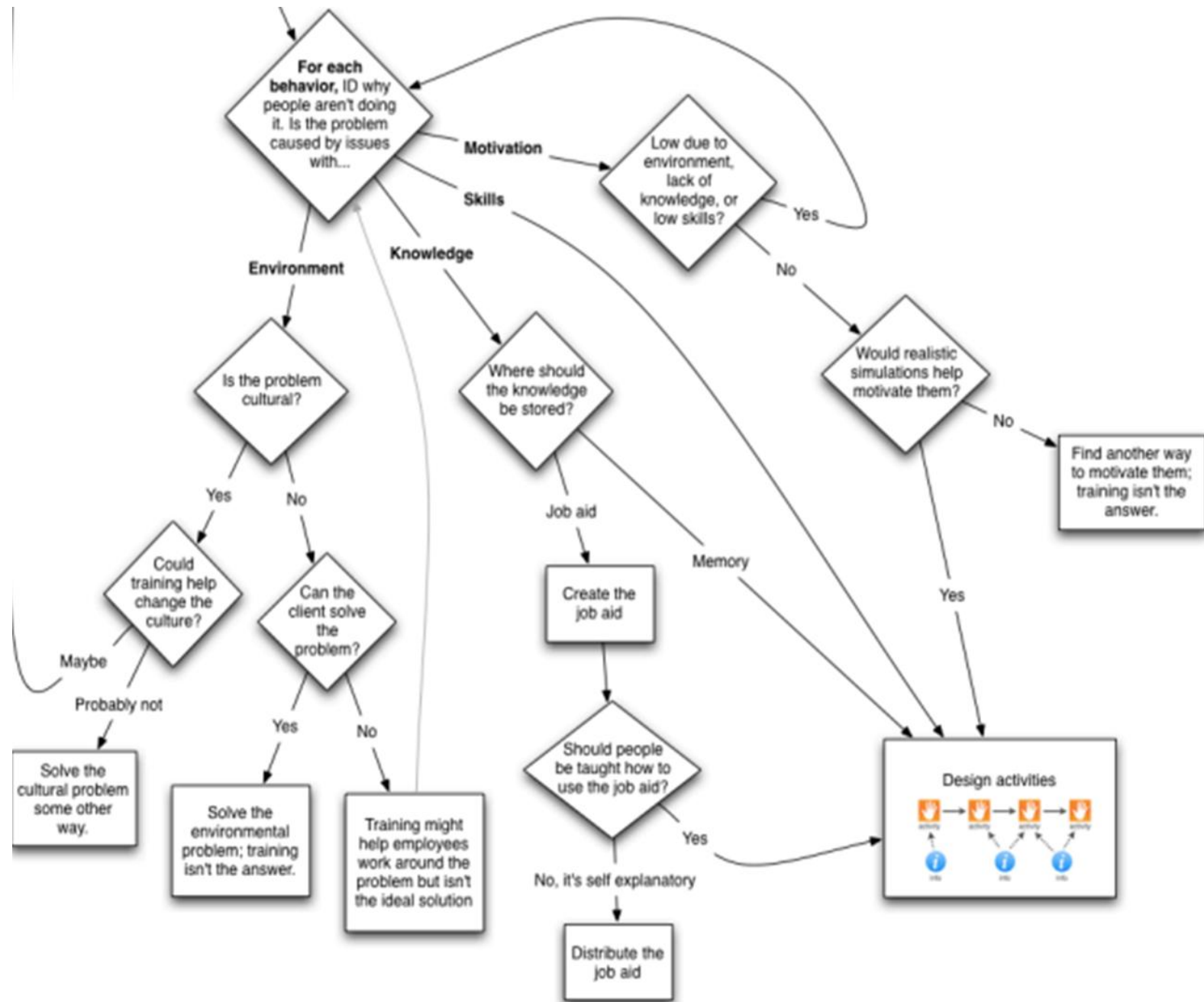


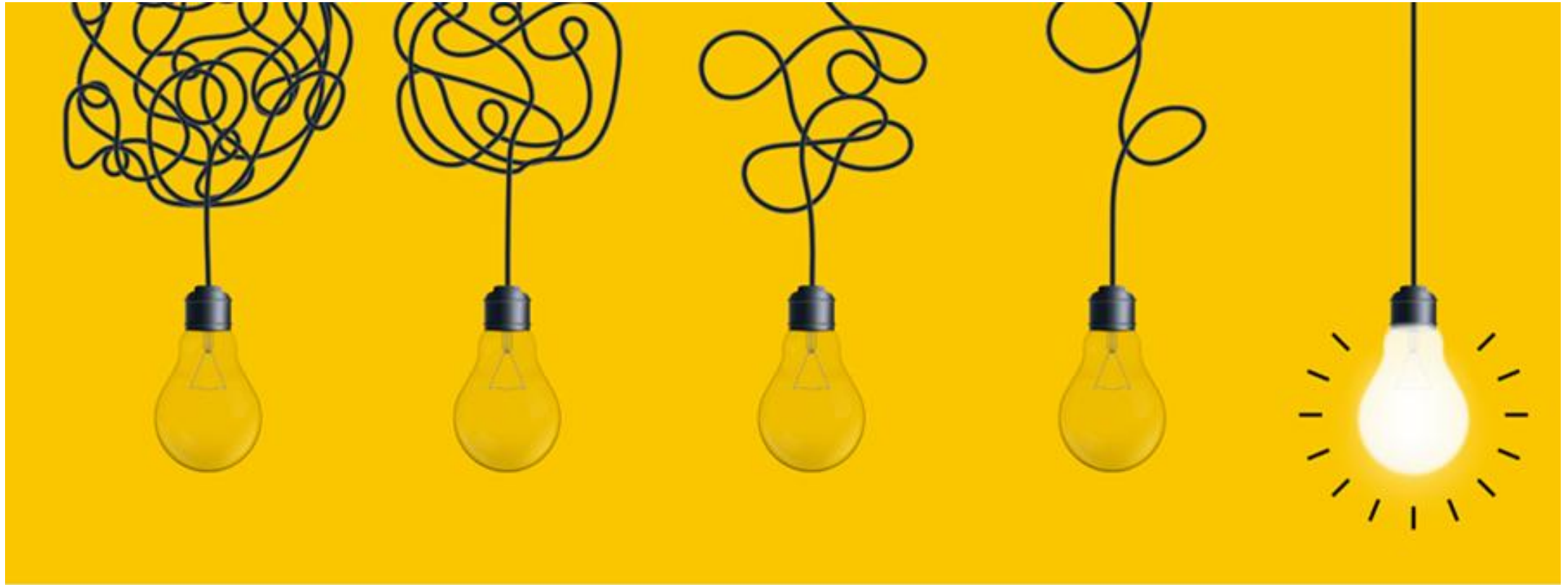
# What needs to change?

- Skills or knowledge?
- Behavior?
- Systems?
- People?
- Accountability?
- Attitudes?

**Ability to APPLY all of these!**

# Do you need a training?





We do know a lot about what DOES work to transfer learning into new behaviors!

From educational research in many different fields of study.

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# Methods For Applying Learning

- **Practice** the new skill (try using the new knowledge)
- **Reflect** on what you observe
- **Seek** feedback from others
- **Share** (Communicate) your experiences

# Applying something new is a BIG job!

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- It involves, most of the time, proposing a change.
- And this can be unsettling!





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How do you  
make changes?

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Consider eating a  
cake....

One bite at a time!

And with others!



Change must include a series of successes as it gets accepted as the “new normal.”



Peer learning groups can combine the impact of their small bites to recognize the collective success.



Creating peer learning groups = a possible answer to the learning/application cycle.

# Peer Learning

What is it?





# What do we know about peer learning?

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Generates “the wisdom of the crowd”

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Supports various roles of the conveners and the participants

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Provides opportunity to track, measure and report outcomes

A Peer Group involves a **commitment** to a **common agenda** for solving a **specific problem** from a **group** of individuals from different sectors.



# What is the value of Peer Learning?

Concentrating energy of the group

- “Engagement is the best thing so far”

Building awareness of common challenges.

Sharing of best practices can improve all practices.

- Hearing about different methods of (approaches to) trainings could stimulate ideas.
- If we can highlight how one agency does something well, then other agencies might think about how they can use the same process.

Working together we can establish our own direction and priorities.

Boosting morale and wellbeing.



- **Formalizing the acquisition and sharing of knowledge** is an effective way to manage knowledge and application in an organization.
- **Make people aware** of how they can get involved in knowledge sharing as you create development opportunities.

What will  
the group  
do?



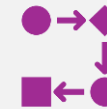
Support each other,  
build a strong network



Share information.  
Learn from each other



Build relationships



Develop a shared  
repertoire of resources:  
tools, materials, ways  
of addressing recurring  
issues/problems.  
Create new tools where  
we find none exist.

Recurring  
themes...

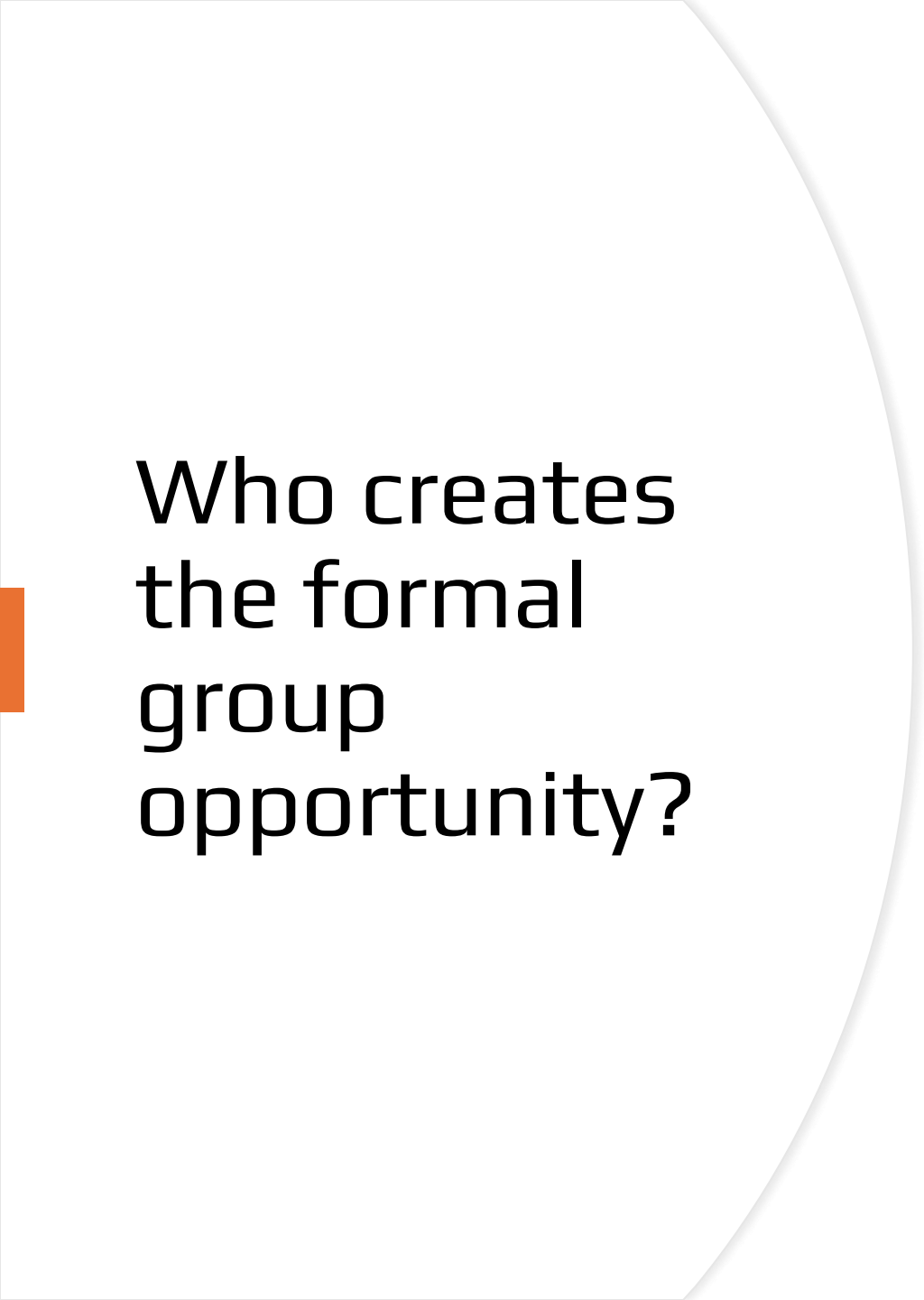


Work in partnership to  
provide input and  
recommendations on  
how future changes can  
be enhanced to better  
meet the needs of the  
network



Plan joint activities



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Who creates  
the formal  
group  
opportunity?

One person?

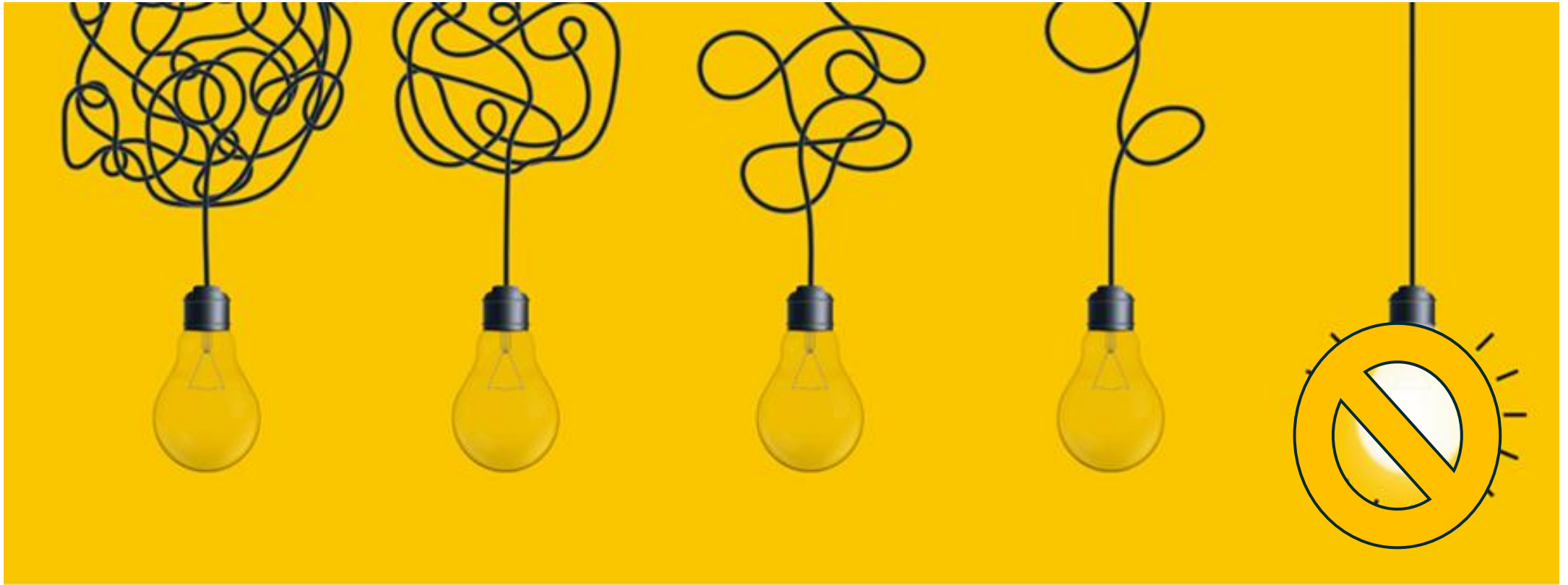
State office, association, an  
interested individual?

Or could a couple, or a few,  
people come together to think  
about what a peer learning  
group could do?

# Joining together in Collective Action

Creating Peer Learning Opportunities





We also know a lot about what DOES NOT work to help translate learning into new behaviors!

From our experiences.



## The way it can go....

- Calling a meeting and using an “open” agenda to gather interest without having a clear idea about what will happen next (after this first meeting)
- Having a few topic areas that have been identified as important for training and technical assistance, but not getting any specific focus for follow up.
- Having a specific focus for follow up, but not identifying anyone who will be leading follow up.
- Identifying someone to convene the next meeting, without having an agreed upon time.
- .....

# Have you had experience with peer groups?


Did they lead to the light bulb burning bright?





# Challenges to creating and maintainin g peer learning groups

- Limited participation of group members
  - Lack of time to participate in meetings,
  - lack of time to do work for the group outside of meetings.
- Lack of authority to suggest any changes
  - ED may support staff in attending, but then staff report barriers upon returning to office.
  - General lack of buy-in of others in the agency
- Staff expect to be told what to do by some higher power so hesitates to create ideas on their own.



"The secret to  
getting ahead is  
getting started."

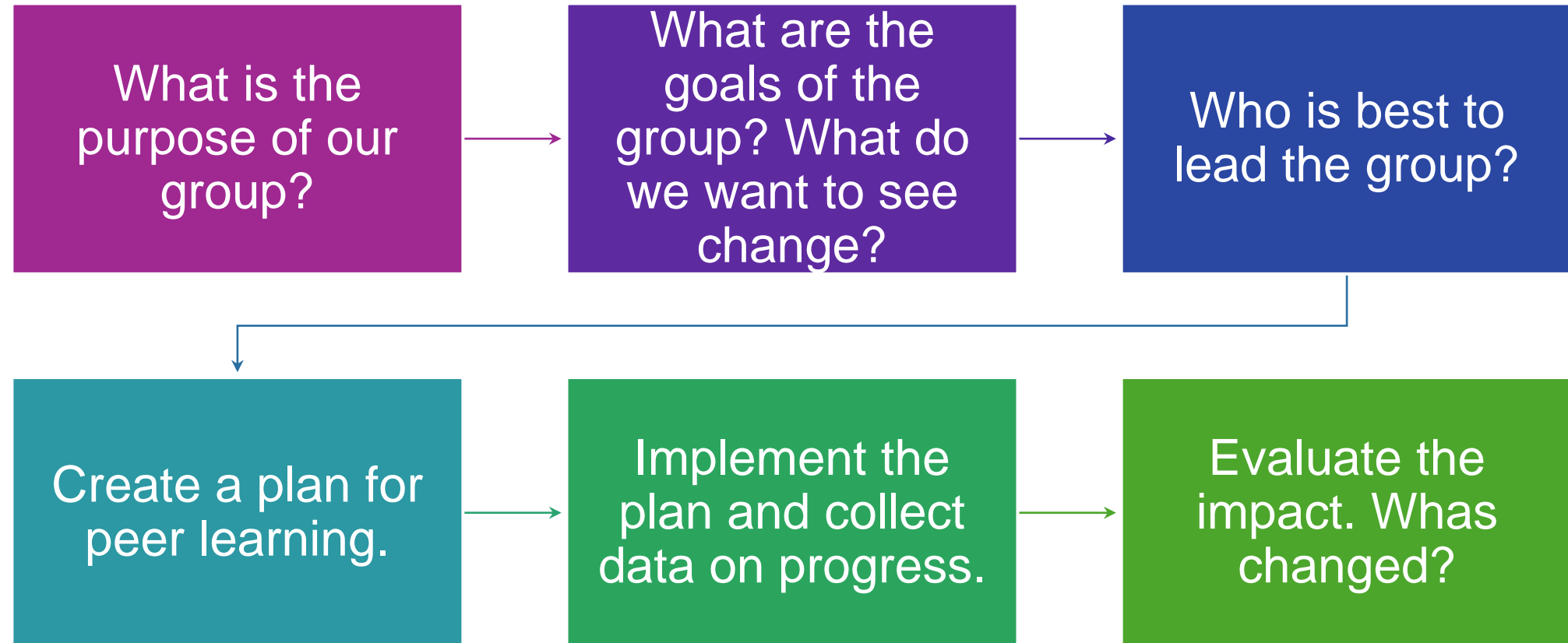
- Mark Twain

# Getting started

What is the right way?

# Need, outcome, plan, implement, review

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# What is the purpose of our group?



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- **What learning and application barriers can the peer group address?**
  - Get some ideas of behaviors or systems or policies or practices that could be improved.
  - How can a peer group help them?

# What are the goals of the group?



## ***Goals related to patterns of behavior***

- Changes in individual behavior among target population
- Changes in professional practice
  - Changes in how we approach our work

## ***Goals related to changes in systems***

- Changes in funding, shifts in flow of funds, improved alignment of resources, increased funding
- Changes in cultural norms
- Changes in public policy



# WHO is the leader?



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- State office
- State Community Action Association (RPIC)
- Training partner
- Local agency
- Individual
- Combination of above?

# Create a peer learning plan.

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- Design tasks and interactions that engage group members in peer learning experiences, such as peer tutoring, group discussions and projects.
- Build activities with clear instructions and when possible, use real world examples as guides.
- Be clear about who is responsible for what, and by when.
- Identify how you will know success has been achieved.
- Promote value and respect for diverse perspectives and contributions so that all members can participate equally.

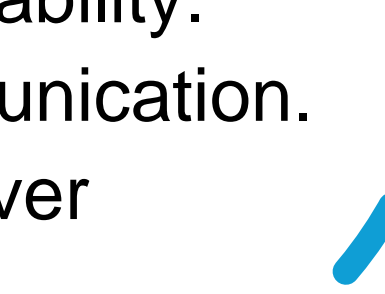
# Ideas to support successful implementation of peer learning

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## Set the group up for success!

- Ensure everyone has a common understanding of the 'problem' or area of need.
  - Obtain consensus on the approach to solve the problem.
  - Create and enforce a clear plan of action.
  - Collect agreed up on data consistently and frequently to measure progress!
  - Establish a system of accountability.
  - Keep open channels of communication.
  - Celebrate success and rally over obstacles!
- 
- A series of blue dashed lines in the bottom right corner, forming a curved path.

# Provide proper motivation

Accelerate the desired changes using a well-designed incentive system.

- Monetary?
- An official thank you or formal recognition?
- Highlighted in promotional material?



# Divide and conquer!

## Use small group activities

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- Small groups provide opportunities for members to actively engage, sharing ideas, solving problems, and collectively building knowledge.
- The principles of collaborative learning focus on interdependence, individual accountability, and group processing as key components of the peer learning process.
- Creating small groups can also **facilitate** collaboration and teamwork, which can be valuable skills in for the peer learning group and in the larger work environment.



# Get input from everyone. Get them all talking.

## Facilitate peer discussions

- Facilitating peer discussions requires knowing the participants.
- Which members can be counted on to provide opinions easily?  
Which need to be coaxed to be actively engaged?
- The facilitator must understand group management dynamics.  
Use active listening and open-ended questions, address disruptions, off-topic conversations, or dominant voices that may hinder communication and collaboration among group members.

# Recognize individual differences

- Not everyone is bold enough to talk about their experiences in front of the entire group and not everyone feels comfortable when asked to prepare a precise procedure step by step.
- The key to success is offering each individual opportunities and tools which utilize their potential the most.



# Employ technologies



- An LMS (Learning Management System) can be used to support peer learning.
  - Not only allows for management of training content and educational materials in one place, but
  - Can provide a platform for communication via text and email, blogs, document sharing, etc.
  - Allows group members to freely exchange opinions and experiences, ask questions, or present solutions to specific problems.
  - Can monitor progress of individuals engaged in specific projects in real time.

# Have real work to do



One activity that helps the group find meaning is when they develop tools.

Examples:

- definitions for National Performance Indicators that are particular to the local area (taking the NASCSP lexicon and adapting it)
- discussing elements to include in Community Needs Assessment surveys (with idea of adopting state survey or modifying something in place)
- make suggestions for work plan revisions and how they can be done

# Maintaining a group



- Hold meetings at times and locations that are convenient.
- Set clear agendas with measurable goals and activities.
- Establish accountability for participation.
- Follow up on tasks, celebrate movement as well as completion.
- Don't forget to reassess!!
- Value the work of the group



# Ideas from the field: How did they do it?

## One bite at a time!

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- Shared what each person had been doing at their agency and compared notes.
- Each presented how the agency has previously done Strategic Planning. Discussed differences between Strategic Plan and Community Action Plan.
- Shared information about data collection practices to help figure out: What is the best way to capture data for the CSBG Annual Report? How are agencies tracking indicators?
- Really consider: How do we analyze the data? What are the steps? Who does it? How is it shared?





# More ideas from the field:

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- Change can be overwhelming.
- Don't be bogged down by the big picture.
- Groups report that they often started with a larger list of “strategies” but then they narrowed their focus.
- Set short term goals -- three to six months – with “assignments” to do between meetings.
- Discuss the difference between individual staff (job duties) vs. agency responsibilities vs. state roles identify what group members actually have control over.



# Next steps- Take action!

What did this session help  
you to think about in  
forming, supporting,  
maintaining a peer group?





Never doubt that a small group of  
thoughtful, committed, citizens  
can change the world. Indeed, it  
is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

# Thanks for your participation

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# Power Point presentation prepared by

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