Principles of Effective Technical Assistance

A variety of factors contribute to the effectiveness of technical assistance activities. Today, conducting needs assessments and identifying outcomes, pedagogy and evaluation activities are commonplace in the development of technical assistance plans. Yet often, technical assistance requested can be in conflict with the mission and values of the technical assistance provider.

One overlooked, yet critical aspect in the development and delivery of technical assistance activities is the identification of the principles that guide services and assist in decision-making. By contrasting technical assistance activities and requests to an established menu of consensus-based principles, technical assistance activities that are consistent with the identified purpose and goals of the provider can be negotiated.

The following principles are not intended to be all-inclusive. In contrast, they are intended to stimulate discussion within a project when reviewing or developing the principles that guide a project’s services.

- Technical assistance intensity should vary according to its purpose.
- Multiple stakeholders should identify technical assistance targets.
- Technical assistance should accomplish tasks with others, not for others.
- Long-term technical assistance activities require multiple sources of funding and support.
Technical assistance should clearly articulate targets and supports.

Technical assistance strategies should shift according to feedback.

Technical assistance targets should be negotiated to reinforce multiple parties.

Technical assistance should be sequenced to continue improvement efforts.

Technical assistance should have both individual and systemic targets.

Technical assistance activities, when discontinued, should leave the door open for future efforts.

Technical assistance should be negotiated; values should be demonstrated.

Technical assistance should be designed to deliver reinforcement on a consistent schedule.

When considering your response to technical assistance requests:

- Do you have a set of principles, which presently guide your project’s services?
- Do you consider these principles when you respond to a technical assistance request?
- Do you respond to requests differently based upon your principles?
- Are the recipients of your technical assistance services aware of your project’s principles and how they impact the delivery of your services?
Types of Technical Assistance

Simplistically, there are three types of technical assistance activities:

1. **Program evaluation** activities
2. **Time-limited** activities
3. **Long-term** activities, or initiatives

In *program evaluation* activities, technical assistance supports the **identification of needs** and assists in the validation of these identified needs. Program evaluation often ranges from internal self-assessment to the review of multiple sources of data obtained from multiple stakeholders. It may be used to identify both individual and systemic technical assistance needs.

**Time-limited** technical assistance activities are usually short-term (less than six months) activities and typically require a “roadmap” or outline of **sequenced activities** to be successful. Typically, they are more structured and process oriented than long term initiatives. The major outcomes of time-limited activities are pre-identified and are broken down into discrete activities. Time limited activities often reflect specialized training addressing a specific content area, and may include demonstration, shaping and modeling of the new skills. Product development is also often accomplished through a time-limited activity.

A **long-term** activity, more accurately described as an initiative, usually starts as a **concept or idea** that requires a broad base of support to be accomplished. The final outcome is often a product of the ongoing planning and implementation of the activities conducted during the initiative. Long-term initiatives often result in new policy and procedure development, the development of model demonstration sites, and the replication and adoption of the new policies or practices.
Technical Assistance Activity or Systems Initiative: Is There a Difference?

Effective technical assistance activities and systems initiatives, whether they are individual or systemic, focus on sustainability, maintenance of resources and linking resources to one another. Although the terms “activity” and “initiative” are often used interchangeably, with little or no differentiation between the two, they are very different with distinctly different characteristics and results.

A **technical assistance activity** typically addresses a specific, single purpose and usually employs a single technical assistance strategy, such as training. The activity is not necessarily linked to another activity, nor is the activity typically linked to other efforts. Although the focus of an activity may be on either an individual or on a system, the activity often results in only short-term effects or impacts, with little sustainability.

In contrast, a **systems initiative** employs multiple technical assistance strategies and typically targets a key goal with multiple objectives. The focus of an initiative can again be on an individual or a system, but the result is a long-term and lasting impact or outcome. To be successful, initiatives must be based on valued outcomes and require sufficient resources, the use of multiple change and technical assistance strategies and internal leadership. Whether it is teacher education or systems intervention, initiatives are typically more successful in achieving and sustaining lasting change.

The **role of a technical assistance provider** in an initiative is also critical to its success, whether it is providing the leadership for the initiative, or participating as a supporting member. A TA provider can take the lead in efforts associated with one activity of an initiative, assist in identifying and linking the initiative to other resources and maintain a focus on the targeted populations and issues.

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