

PILOTING PROGRAM CHANGES

Conducting a pilot study of any program modifications is important in order to assess whether the changes have the intended effects and if the changes produce negative effects. Any time a new program component is instituted, a pilot period of at least one month should be conducted to evaluate the impact of the change. Further modifications are often difficult to make once a program or component has been formally instituted.

The information below provides practical guidelines for running a pilot study. It is intended to be used by the program director or manager within the complicated and taxing time restraints of his or her busy schedule. It is not intended to be a guide for planning and implementing a scientific study or program evaluation.

When it is decided that a change is needed to a program intervention or component it is necessary to run a pilot study. A pilot study can produce useful information about your intervention and save valuable time and resources by bringing to light potential problems or unexpected outcomes of the intervention. Even when applying a well known and studied intervention it is unknown how a specific population in a specific setting will respond to it.

The following are some guidelines and suggestions on how to run a pilot study. The information included should be used to clarify: 1) what the change is intended to do; 2) how the impact of the change will be measured; and 3) what outcome will be considered a success.

Pre-Study Questions

1. *What should change?*
 - Typical targets focus on changing offender behaviors or attitudes and increasing program compliance.
2. *What will bring about the change?*
 - This includes, what will be done differently, why the change is needed, and how the change will work.
3. *How will the change be measured?*
 - At the level of an individual or for the group as a whole?
 - Who will do the measuring? Do they have the time and tools needed?
 - In order for every person to measure the behaviors or events in the same way, the events need to be defined clearly. Before the pilot starts discussions should be had with staff about what should be considered the behavior and what should not. All staff that are to be recording should be well educated so that observations by the various staff members are made using the same rules.
 - Some pre-pilot training should be done with the staff who will be measuring the changes. These staff should be trained on what they will be observing (what counts and what does not); how they are to note/record the behavior.
4. *How often will the target be measured?*
 - Is this time interval a sufficient amount of time for change to occur?
 - Pilots of significant changes should be no shorter than one month.
5. *What will happen to consider the intervention or change successful?*
 - How frequently is the target (behavior/attitude/problem) happening before the change?
 - How frequently should the target happen after the change?
 - What is considered change, significant change, no change, and negative change?

During Study Questions

1. *Are all persons recording events in the same manner?*
2. *Is recording being done in a consistent and uniform way?*
3. *If not, how is it being done and does this need to change?*
4. *What problems have been noticed?*
5. *What improvements or positives have been noticed?*

After Study Question

1. *How often is the target happening now?*
2. *Is that considered success?*
 - How close is it to the level of success defined at the study start?
3. *What input can the recorders give?*
 - Before, during and after the pilot, hold discussions with the persons who are measuring the interventions. During these discussions staff should be asked about what is working, what is not working, what difficulties, challenges, etc. they have ran into. These concerns should be taken seriously. The pilot can be modified as needed to accommodate new discoveries.
4. *Will you continue the intervention, as is?*
5. *What modifications may be needed?*
6. *Is further study needed?*

AN EXAMPLE

Agency X was having a problem with group meeting attendance. They noticed that each session was being started later and later because clients were not coming on time. They wanted to see if they could get their attendance to a more acceptable level and thought that offering a reward to those who showed up on time would be a good idea. They decided to do a pilot study to see if this intervention would decrease tardiness in their groups.

Before starting Agency X meet with their staff to define the problem and decide how the study would be conducted. They asked the following questions with the following answers:

1. *What do we want to change?*
 - Tardiness of clients to group.
2. *What will be the program modification or change?*
 - Each client who shows up on or before the start of group will be given a piece of candy.
3. *How will we measure the change?*
 - By number of clients who are in their seats on or before the appointed group time for two weeks before and two weeks after the program modification.
4. *How long will we test the intervention or change?*
5. *How often will we measure the change?*
 - At every meeting during the four week period.
6. *Will we measure each individual or the group as a whole?*
 - Attendance will be collected for each individual client.
7. *Who will do the measuring?*
 - A staff member who is not conducting the group will keep track attendance for two weeks after the change.
8. *Does this time interval makes sense given what targeted?*
 - Yes, because clients come every day so this time period will be long enough that if there is some problem on a single day, such as a bad weather, it will not overly affect the results.
9. *What will happen to consider the intervention or change successful?*
 - The group will increase their timeliness by twenty percent.
10. *How frequently is the target (behavior/attitude/problem) happening before the change?*
 - After keeping track for two weeks prior to starting the intervention, seventy percent of clients were late each session.
11. *How frequently should the target happen after the change?*
 - The group should not average more than ten percent late each session

Collecting Data

1. *Are all recorders recording in the same manner?*
 - At the weekly staff meeting, the program director asked each staff person who was recording attendance to write down the definition they had been using to decide whether a client was late. One staff member was giving the clients a 5 min grace period, while none of the others were. This was corrected through a discussion with that staff. Because of this mistake the two week pilot period was begun again with all staff properly informed and trained.
2. *Is recording being done in a consistent and uniform way?*
 - The program director periodically asked staff at the beginning of the group for their attendance tracking sheets to assess whether each person was recording at the time a group began.

3. *If not, how is it being done/does this need to change?*
 - The program director's checks showed that the staff was consistently recording the youth who were late at the beginning of each group.
4. *What problems have you noticed?*
 - There was a problem with how one of the staff defined late attendance.
5. *What improvements/positives have you noticed?*
 - Staff felt there already was an improvement in punctual attendance.

- After the two week trial, the staff met together to talk about why the pilot had not been successful. They recounted that although they did not meet the 90%, all but one client was on time 100% of the time. So if it were not for this one client they would have had 100% on time attendance. They discussed what was going on with this one client and why the intervention did not work with him/her. They discovered that that client did not like candy and therefore was not motivated by the candy reward.

5. *Will you continue the intervention, as is?*
 - Yes, because it was successful for all but one client.
6. *What modifications may be needed?*
 - Some work will have to be done with varying motivators for difference clients.
7. *Is further study needed?*
 - Yes, alternative motivators could be examined. Also, decisions as to when the alternative motivators should be used could be examined.

Analyzing Data

1. *How often is the target happening now?*
 - 85% on time attendance
2. *Is that considered success?*
 - No, the goal was 90%
3. *How close is it to the level of success defined at the study start?*
 - 5% short
4. *What input can the recorders give?*