

What the Heck is a ‘Practice Model’ and Why Should I Care?

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July 5, 2018

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If you are a probation or parole officer (PO) working in community corrections you already have a ‘practice model’. Your model consists of all the practices you use on a daily basis with the knowledge, belief or hope that they will help foster rehabilitation for your clients, keep you safely employed, develop your agency, keep the judges and other stakeholders you interact with relatively happy, and prevent more crime and harm from happening in the community. Your practice model covers the habitual ways you interact with fellow staff, get your paper work done, manage your caseload, keep yourself motivated, establish working relationships with clients, assess clients, encourage clients, challenge clients, sanction clients, help clients stay motivated in the face of the many challenges they face, develop new skills in clients, and link clients to resources in your community etc.

Even though you have a practice model you probably cannot easily articulate all the bits and pieces of your model or explain how you sequence the different practices you use to someone who asks you how you do your job. It is like riding a bike, you know how to do it but you can’t precisely explain when you start to break going around a particular corner, if you use just the front or the back break or both at the same time, or the precise angle at which you turn your bike into the corner. Riding a bike is a complicated skill, but working with people is far more complex and much more difficult to explain because there are multiple causes for what happens. Furthermore, your practice model is not static, it constantly evolves and changes depending on which colleagues you talk with, how you are feeling, the size and type of your caseload, which trainings your attend, what you learn from your supervisor, the failures and successes with your clients, and the constant flow of your many experiences. Not only do you have a practice model that is unique to you, but every one of your fellow officers has one that is unique to them, and your particular agency also has an agency practice model that is unique to it and your agency context. What you probably do not have is a clearly articulated practice model that is shared, understood, agreed to, and practiced by all the officers and supervisors in your agency.

The fact that all of the existing practice models in your agency are not shared and are somewhat vague and undeveloped means that you are never quite sure exactly what you should try to accomplish with your clients at any given moment along the journey of supervision. The vagueness and lack of common agreement about your practice model also makes it very difficult for you or the agency to know how effective your practice models are, or what parts of the models are and are not working. This lack of feedback makes it hard for you and your colleagues to keep developing and improving your practice models. The lack of clarity also makes it hard to discern how much your practice model effectively integrates the various “evidence-based practices” in our field such as role clarification, risk, need & responsivity assessment, case planning, motivational interviewing, cognitive skill development and gender specific programming.

Every time you meet face-to-face with a client you enter into a big open “discretionary space”. It is totally at your discretion and the discretion of your client to choose what to say and do. Many officers say that the many vague practice models in agencies do not give them enough practical guidance for navigating across this discretionary space for structuring the journey of supervision. Officers do not want to be fenced in with a script to follow for every client interaction they have, but they also do not want to be left at sea without a rudder. For many reasons, therefore, agencies and officers are now finding it helpful to more clearly articulate a shared practice model across the agency, and develop methods of testing the effectiveness of the various elements in that model with their clients.

These more developed and articulated “Practice Models” [[1]](#footnote-1) have only begun to emerge in the last 10 years or so, and now there are a handful of off-the-shelf models. The STICS or Strategic Training Initiative for Community Supervision from Canada (Bonta et al. 2011), and the EPICS (Effective Practices In Community Supervision) model from the University of Cincinnati (Cincinnati)are perhaps the best known of the off-the-shelf varieties. Another example is the COMBINES model (Bogue, Diebel, and O 'Connor 2008). All three of these models are attempts to bring research-to-practice. In other words the models were created based on the research in our field and intended to be installed through training and coaching into a practice situation. The research-to-practice way of doing things has been the primary thrust for introducing scientifically vetted or “evidence-based practices” into the field. But agencies that have sought to purchase and then install these models in their agencies have often struggled with the process of doing so because the outside “*evidence-based models*” can clash with the existing inside “*practice-based models*” and cause a lot of discord and disorientation among staff and clients. So even though there is promising research supporting the effectiveness of these “evidence-based” models there are many inherent problems involved in moving something designed in academia into the field. For example, the process often makes line officers feel like their knowledge, skills and expertise is being ignored, and that they are being told they are doing something wrong that needs to be fixed. Years of experience with trying to install models have taught us that we need a way of combining “evidence-based practices” with “practice-based evidence”. Practice-based evidence is the evidence for what works and does not work that comes from the daily practice of every PO and supervisor, and it is perhaps more important than “evidence-based practice” because it necessarily and rightly controls what actually happens with clients.

Since 2012, Brad and Tom[[2]](#footnote-2) have been testing a method of helping agencies to more clearly develop and articulate a shared “home grown” practice model that combines the agency’s practice-based evidence with the evidence-based practices of research. This enables an agency to develop a clear and shared practice model that is suited to the local context, needs and demands, and is owned by the agency staff who co-create the model with the support and challenge of Brad and Tom. In this method Brad and Tom act less as the experts and more as coaches to the agency team members who are the real experts in their own field and context. It turns out that when an agency takes this kind of “top supported, bottom up” rather than a “top down” approach good things happen. Officers are given the autonomy to and ably develop a clear and shared model that fits their context and their clients.

Every practice model has some elements that are common to all practice models. For example, every PO will tell you that an effective model has to include practices that build rapport with clients and other practices such assessing client risk and working on a change plan with clients. That is why the STICS, EPICS and COMBINES models all include variations of how to work with these elements. Rather than leaving each agency to its own devices while it is developing its Practice Model, Brad and Tom have distilled a set of core elements from the practice and research in our field into a flexible framework or a skeleton that an agency can use and modify as it fleshes out the particular look or body that will be its Practice Model. This framework is called [COVE](http://www.j-sat.com/cove/)© which stands for Coaching Options that are Versatile and Effective, and it incorporates key practices that have been found to be effective over time. COVE conjures up an image of a safe harbor where people working together can build or repair a ship that is capable of taking them on a successful journey of rehabilitation or desistance. COVE does not dictate the set of practices to an agency, but it does orient an agency’s staff and saves it precious time as it creates its own Practice Model from both practice-based evidence and evidence-based practices. The core practices that COVE incorporates in a sequenced fashion are role clarification, motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioral skill rehearsal, developmental coaching and adult learning. Every car has what is called a chassis, the supporting frame on which is built a particular car model (Ford, Chevy, BMW, Toyota etc.). COVE gives an agency a supporting frame on which to build its particular practice model. But every car also needs to be road tested, so Brad and Tom also guide each agency in a process called the “Building Blocks Model” that allows its officers to test the Practice Model they build to make sure it works. If you would like to learn more about co-creating and road testing a Practice Model for your agency please contact Brad or Tom.

References:

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1. “A practice model is an integrated set of evidence-based practices and principles (EBP) that an agency believes will result in desirable public safety outcomes if they are supported by the agency and followed with fidelity by its officers. A practice model describes in detail the practices that line staff need to follow to prevent more crime and promote the social and human capital (rehabilitation) of people under supervision.” (Bogue and O 'Connor 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brad’s company is called [Justice Systems Assessment and Training](http://www.j-sat.com/). Tom’s company is called [Transforming Corrections](http://transformingcorrections.com/). The two companies combine resources and work as a team on many projects. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)