

## Putting Best Practices into Practice

by Charles Parry, Marilyn Darling, and Stever Robbins

Seeking out and spreading best practices throughout an organization—particularly a large organization—provides significant strategic advantages. The idea of identifying and sharing best practices is also a natural extension of organizational improvement approaches with widespread followings such as quality improvement and organizational learning. And yet, many attempts to propagate best practices across organizational boundaries meet with failure. Obstacles range from team-level protectionism to organizational structure and old habits of thought. For example, in the West, most organizations reward individual performance and innovation. This

stems from a pioneer-like orientation of “figuring things out for ourselves.” But with the globalization of markets and the intense competition that it creates, organizations must continually seek efficient ways to improve—from any source, whether down the hall or across the world.

The propagation of best practices helps us improve leverage, efficiency, control, and efficacy within our organization. How?

- We obtain *leverage* by multiplying the payoffs of a successful innovation and by tapping into the hidden asset of the knowledge base arising from having multiple units in operation under a single corporate banner.
- Improvements in *efficiency* come from avoiding unnecessary costs such as

the duplication of effort in “reinventing the wheel.”

- We increase *control* by standardizing operations around a best practice where appropriate.
- Raising the bar by drawing attention to high-performing practices increases *efficacy* by keeping us current with the best ways of doing things.

### Barriers at the Gate

The first hurdle to an organization adopting best practices as a routine way of doing business may be adjusting how we think and speak about this concept. The words we use to describe embracing others' practices reflect our culture's deep ambiguity about doing so. For

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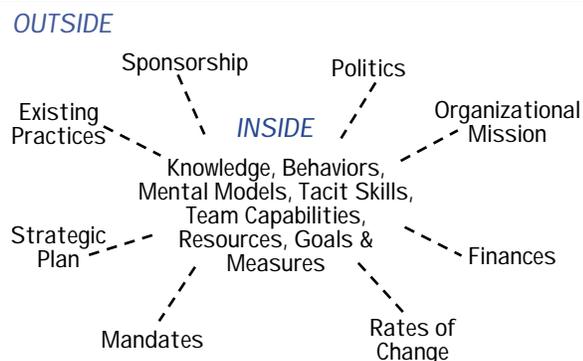
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### Seeing the Whole Picture of a Best Practice



Specifications of a propagatable best practice must include critical interactions and transactions between what is “inside” the practice and what is “outside”—the existing organizational practices and resources.

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example, when referring to best practices, do leaders in your organization use terms such as *transfer*, *replicate*, *emulate*, *duplicate*, *translate*, *benchmark*, *roll out*, *propagate*, or *disseminate*? Or are they more likely to employ words like *imitate*, *evangelize*, *clone*, *copy*, and *shamelessly steal*? The name of Motorola's first benchmarking initiative, "Operation Bandit," captured this tension well. The connotations of knowledge sharing hinge tightly on people's sense of boundaries, and on the existing customs for moving knowledge across them.

Our instinctive response to other groups, whether inside or outside our company, is to compete. But to learn from each other, we need to parlay that impulse

into a sense of internal collaboration. In this way, we can compete more effectively with *external* organizations.

Teams can also exhibit a range of responses that arrest or slow the migration of best practices across organizational units, including:

- **Priority:** "We've got a full plate already. What do you suggest we *stop* doing to make time for this new practice?"
- **Ecology:** "Has anyone thought about the ancillary costs? Looks good on paper, but we don't have the skills or the resources to pull this off!"
- **Authority:** "Who says we need this initiative? This just proves how little corporate understands what we do."
- **Funding:** "Learning is too soft; let's see some results first!"
- **Politics:** "So the 'x' group thinks they are better than us? Right. We'll show them!"
- **Speed:** "Our product life cycle is down to nine months now. By the time it was implemented, it wouldn't be a solution to anything."

Organizations resist some changes and new practices for good reasons. Not all practices deserve to be propagated. Programs and practices pushed out into the work force without proper support and allowances for ramping-up time are poor investments. Practices that offer only general solutions to general problems also fare poorly. In short, the propagation of a practice must help people achieve specific goals, and must never become an end in itself.

### ***Principles for Propagation***

So, how can organizations establish a user-friendly environment for the sharing and widespread use of best practices? Imagine that your team has discovered a practice that could be a great asset to the company if others used it. Perhaps it's a decision-making method, a strategy for involving the customer in product development, or

tactic knowledge about how to adjust a system's components to survive certain stresses. We believe that five conditions are required for successfully propagating such a best practice to other parts of your organization.

- **Articulating the Business Case:** The practice makes sense at multiple levels and to different "camps."
- **Local Conditions Matter . . . a Lot:** The practice is adaptable by users to fit their local situations.
- **Making the "Invisibles" Visible:** The practice is understood as a whole, including its "invisibles."
- **Systems and Structures Don't Block Collaboration:** The movement of behavioral knowledge across organizational boundaries is not systemically blocked.
- **Storing and Retrieving Knowledge:** Knowledge is captured in a form that makes sense to and attracts those who might use it.

These conditions are reflected in the reinforcing loops depicted in "Success Engines for Sharing Best Practices" on p. 3. The loops act in tandem to ensure the successful exchange of best practices. As the perception of the value of sharing best practices across boundaries increases within an organization, teams take actions that support propagation (R1, R3, and R4). Adopting best practices creates positive business results (R1 and R2), reinforcing interest in spreading best practices.

### ***Articulating the Business Case.***

For a learning initiative to succeed, its business purpose must be crystal clear. Sponsors of the practice need to be able to respond to the question, "What compelling problem or opportunity is the initiative an answer to, in terms of the organization's larger goals?" Over time, the habit of articulating a close connection between best-practice initiatives and business goals can set up a reinforcing loop, allowing teams to disseminate ideas with greater ease (R1 in "Success Engines for Sharing Best Practices").

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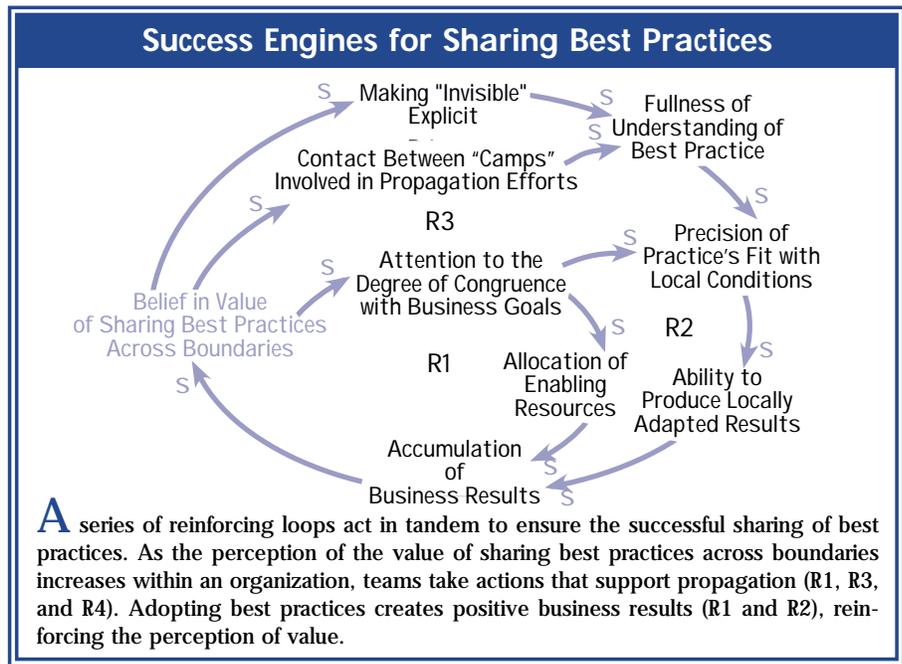
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For instance, the Boston Police Department has adopted a process that links best practices and business goals—in this case, the reduction of crime. Twice a month, beat cops, captains, the police chief, and the superintendent come together for a “Crime Analysis Meeting” (CAM). They examine crime trends in detail to discover what is behind them and to identify what they are doing to reinforce positive trends or reverse negative ones. The team reports on the results of earlier efforts, shares successful practices, and develops local action plans.

The CAM practice is self-reinforcing because it focuses tightly on key business results. The more police understand how their daily actions affect specific crime trends, the higher the quality of their actions, and the more obvious the value of the CAMs. Through the CAMs, the Boston Police Force has shifted the focus of policing from responding to 911 calls to stopping crime in its tracks. Boston’s reduction of the crime rate—now at a 30-year low—has prompted President Clinton to call for replication of their approach.

When people in the different parts of the organization understand how a practice supports clear business goals, they can actively collaborate to help it spread. Rearticulating the business case in terms understandable to each group of possible stakeholders requires the use of inquiry and sharing of perspectives across organizational boundaries.

Three “camps” involved in disseminating most best practices are suppliers, sponsors, and end-users. Suppliers of a best practice often become so enamored with the practice they originated that they can’t “see the forest for the trees.” In promoting a best-practice initiative, sponsors must remember that no best practice is a magic bullet, and that overly energetic propagation can contribute to employee burnout through the “death-by-a-thousand-initiatives”



syndrome. End-users generally want to know why a certain practice is considered “best,” and may want reassurance that the change effort will pay off. They may also become defensive if suppliers or sponsors imply a deficiency in end-users’ current practices.

**Local Conditions Matter . . . a Lot.** A best practice is “best” primarily because it precisely fits the needs and circumstances of its practitioners. So, what worked in one situation may not work in another. For example, just because sponsoring softball games raised morale at one factory doesn’t mean it will produce the same result at every other factory. Thus, end-users must be allowed—and encouraged—to adapt a practice to suit their situation (R2 in “Success Engines for Sharing Best Practices”).

Here are some guidelines to maximize the likelihood that a particular practice can be successfully adapted to fit local conditions:

- *Clarify the essentials:* What’s the real essence of the practice? Differentiating the essentials from accompanying information, measurements, and stories allows a supplier to avoid overspecification and rigidity. With few nonnegotiables, teams can tailor a practice to suit their own needs.

- *Make the description of the practice robust:* A procedure’s simplicity does not necessarily translate into easy implementation in a different context. Ample information about the practice makes it more adaptable by others. Documentation should include a brief definition of the practice; purpose of the practice; conditions where it applies; key guiding principles and procedures; and an example.
- *Get the right level of abstraction:* Is the best practice the concept, the execution—or both? For example, a development team at an agribusiness firm needs to consider whether they want to propagate a specific innovation (a vigorous new fruit tree) worldwide or *the process that produced the innovation*.
- *Include transition time:* Most of us realize that it is unrealistic to provide people with instructions on how to ride a bike and then expect them to cycle around the block immediately. Yet when implementing a best practice, we often forget to allocate time for learning from mistakes, adapting, and internalizing new behaviors.

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### **Making the “Invisibles” Visible.**

To propagate a practice, we must recognize and manage several “invisible” aspects of it—or risk discovering them only through failure (R4 in “Success Engines for Sharing Best Practices”). The first “invisible” is the tacit knowledge associated with a practice. As Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi assert, “It is precisely during the time this conversion takes place—from tacit to explicit, and . . . back again into tacit—that organizational knowledge is created.” Highly skilled individuals possess many capabilities that come automatically to them and that they cannot easily make explicit. Others may not even notice a skill essential to the implementation of a best practice is missing until they try to master the practice. The transfer of tacit knowledge most often takes place through apprenticeship or mentoring—direct, extended contact between an expert and a learner.

The second “invisible” is team knowledge. As a team engages in a best practice that they developed, many of their essential and highly patterned interactions are implicit and completely invisible to them. In some sense, this knowledge doesn’t reside *in* any of the team members but *between* them. Without the benefit of a skilled observer or a strategy for the team to self-model, crucial parts of the practice can be lost.

A third “invisible” is knowledge about the crucial interactions between the practice and its environment. We tend to think of a best practice as consisting of a set of techniques and capabilities, performance measures, and so on. Yet factors that shape the environment in which a practice is “planted” also play a major role in determining a practice’s success. So best practices actually have an “inside” and an “outside” (see “Seeing the Whole Picture of a Best Practice” on p. 1).

Here’s an example of what can happen when this third aspect is overlooked: A training group in a large organization upgraded the technology and quality standards by which it delivered instructional programs for a major client. The client gave rave reviews to the first two courses and requested new programs on three more topics. The training team held a debrief session to map out their best practices. In the course of the meeting, they discovered that the client had not paid the bill for the two courses and had never committed to the dramatically higher production costs of the upgraded programs. The “inside” of the practice was truly excellent. Yet the “outside”—the transactions between the training team and other groups, including their own accounting department and the external customer—had some serious glitches.

The inclusion of key boundary management information is essential for the practice to successfully settle in somewhere else. This might include identifying critical links to preexisting customs, funding priorities, crossfunctional communications, and so on.

**Systems and Structures Don’t Block Collaboration.** Working in a firm with a clear organizational mission at each level makes the exchange of best practices—and anything else requiring collaboration across units—much easier. But systems that focus too much on local optimization create major barriers to the sharing of best practices. For example, at a U.S. national defense laboratory, project groups gradually developed independent sources of funding. This set in motion a self-reinforcing pattern, where actions that were in the best interest of the entire lab were generally not in the best interest of any given team. Even though the organization installed an intranet to encourage interaction among the lab’s groups, people perceived devoting time and effort toward communicating across

teams as “taking your eye off the ball.” A project leader put it this way: “I once wrote up what we do in great detail. I guarantee no one read it. So why bother?”

In some businesses, on the other hand, collaboration and the adoption of proven processes have been deemed just as important as innovation (R3 in “Success Engines for Sharing Best Practices”). GE, for example, recognized that myriad boundaries impeded their ability to generate and transfer ideas. A “not-invented-here” attitude limited their ability to learn from others within and outside the company. To make the boundaries more permeable, the company now rewards managers more for successfully implementing a practice “copied” than for developing a new practice; their compensation also now reflects the performance of the company as a whole.

Few managers have the leverage to make a global change like altering their organization’s compensation system. However, a manager can create a shift by attaching a practice (or part of it) to an ongoing “authorized” activity. Thus, an administrator at Boston University began propagating a set of best practices in meeting management by starting small—sending a proposed agenda around for input before the biweekly staff meeting. Three meetings later, the group realized that this practice had enhanced participation and timeliness and reduced tangents, so they asked what other best practices were available.

**Storing and Retrieving Knowledge.** Many organizations collect and “bank” a cache of best practices. They often build internal web sites, intending to disseminate best practices within the company as efficiently and quickly as possible. Such efforts frequently focus on—and become entangled with—technology decisions, such as what database platform to use, how to index data, and who will own and maintain the site.

But best practices are valuable only in their use, not in their accumulation and digitization. To evaluate the potential usefulness of a practice, look at it from a marketing perspective. What sort of shelf-life does it have? What is the best way to package and deliver this “product”? Who is going to be interested in it, and how are they most likely to seek out the information? Given that prospective “customers” have needs and cultures that differ from those of the practice’s originators, storage must be done in a way that serves users’ needs. When database designers think of themselves not as librarians/archivists but as matchmakers/brokers, they shift their focus from questions of storage to questions of retrieval. The retrieval mindset moves away from categorizing data toward identifying users’ questions and problems for which a given practice offers an answer or solution.

For instance, a VP at a national defense lab realized that a large percentage of the lab’s engineers were reaching retirement age. The risk of losing the expertise that these folks had accumulated posed a compelling problem. The VP initiated a large preservation venture to capture the engineers’ knowledge. The approach featured videotaped interviews and transcripts. But insufficient thought had been given to the *customers’* needs—who, why, and how people would access this database. Without attending to how the material would be used, the program ran the risk of accumulating an impenetrable mass of war stories—historically interesting, but strategically useless.

Posing the question, “What would the lab no longer be able to do if employee ‘x’ disappeared tomorrow?” focused the interviews on information the lab really needed to capture. Further, a “newbie” engineer was added to each interview panel. Because these newer employees were the engineers of the future, their pres-

### Five Principles for Propagating Best Practices

- **State the business case.** Clearly articulating how a practice supports business goals allows the different parts of the organization to support and collaborate on its propagation. Consider the business case not just for top management, but also for suppliers, sponsors, and end-users.
- **Adapt the practice to fit local conditions.** Others seldom institute a practice in exactly the same way a supplier specifies it. Expect—and support—local variation in the implementation of best practices. Avoid overspecification and rigidity in documenting the practice.
- **Understand how your practice really works.** Be sure to consider the “invisible” as well as the more obvious characteristics of a practice. These include the tacit knowledge and unique capabilities of individuals; the implicit, highly patterned interactions among the team members operationalizing the practice; and the essential interactions between the practice and the organizational environment in which it must operate.
- **Make sure your organization supports collaboration.** Does your company value repeating proven practices as much as it does innovation? Before jumping on the best-practices bandwagon, assess which systems and structures support or block collaboration across units within your organization.
- **Don’t allow the gems to get lost in the computer.** Given that prospective customers of a best practice have different needs and customs than those of database specialists, ensure that the storage modality of any information on best practices serves and attracts the desired end-users.

ence on the panels brought the “customers” closer and added an immediate transfer of knowledge.

### **Opening the Gate**

Some say that success comes down to two simple things: When what you’re doing isn’t working, do something else, and when you’re doing something that works, keep doing it! Most firms handle the first task pretty well by rewarding innovation and problem solving. Applying this second principle means featuring your strengths and spreading effective practices within the enterprise. If you find that your attempts to move best practices from group to group keep getting stopped at organizational boundaries, try following the guidelines we’ve outlined in “Five

Principles for Propagating Best Practices.” Once you’ve put the engine into motion, sharing best practices can be an important driver of success for your organization. 

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