



Resources

Intervening In A Complex System

By [Chris Corrigan](#)

It can be tricky to intervene in a complex system, as actions can cause unintended and unanticipated consequences, and perhaps even cause the system to deteriorate or become destabilized. The “5 Ps” provide a nuanced scaffold that enable us to “learn as we do” using “little bets” before rolling out any large scale interventions, and agilely respond to the information and needs that emerge. The intention of the “5 P’s” is to give some shared language and context to service organizations.

PATTERNS Study the patterns in a complex setting using narrative capture and sense-making. This can be done with the SenseMaker(tm) software, and it can also be done with dialogic interventions. The key thing is to let the people themselves tag their stories or at the very least have a group of people reviewing data and finding patterns together. For example, you might notice a correlation between stressful times in an organization and an increase in feelings of discriminatory behaviour.

PROBE Once you have identified some patterns, you can make some hypotheses about what might work and the time to develop some safe-to-fail probes. These aren’t meant to be successful: they are meant to tell you whether or not the patterns you are sensing have developmental potential. Failure is entirely welcome. (ie, What if we offered stress reduction activities during high stress times to help release pent up feelings?) We want to be okay with the possibility that they might not work. *(100% focus on learning)*

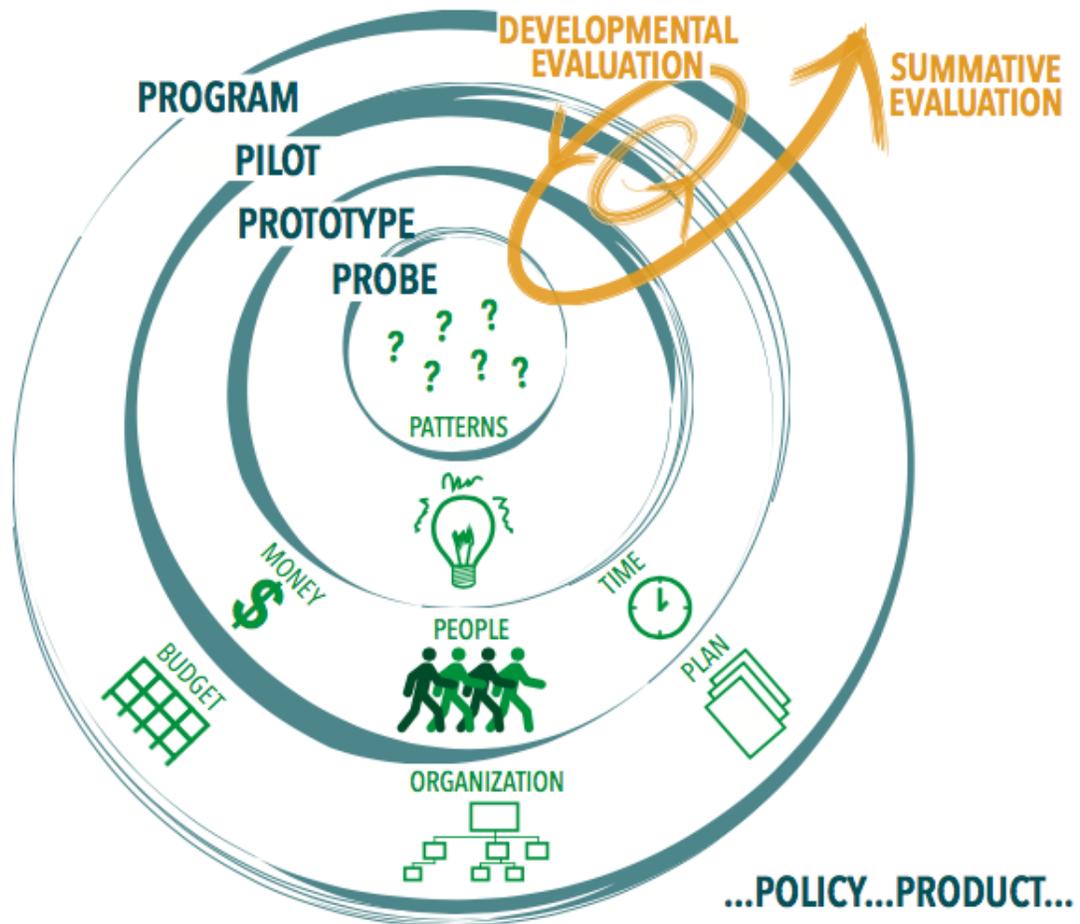
PROTOTYPE If a probe shows some promise, you might develop a prototype to develop a concept. Prototypes are designed to have tolerance for failure, in that failure helps you to iterate and improve the concept. The goal is to develop something that is working. *(80% focus on learning, 20% on concept)*

PILOT A pilot project is usually a limited time proof of concept. Roll it out over a year and see what you learn. In Pilot projects you can begin to use some summative evaluation methods to see what has changed over time. Because of their intensive resource commitment, pilot projects are hardly ever allowed to fail, making them very poor ways of learning and innovating, but very good ways to see how stable we need to make an approach. *(80% focus on concept, 20% on learning)*

PROJECT/PROGRAM/POLICY Whatever the highest level and most stable form of an initiative is, you will get to there if your pilot shows promise, and the results are clear. Work at this level will last over time, but needs regular monitoring so that an organization knows when it’s time to tinker and when it’s time to change it.

If you're ready to address strategic challenges using dialogic approaches to decision making, or eager to explore a ton of amazing resources, visit [Chris Corrigan](#).

PROBES, PROTOTYPES, PILOTS



A few things which might be helpful as you move through these circles.

Dialogue is helpful at every scale. When you are working in a complex system, dialogue ensures that you are getting dissent, contrary views and outlying ideas into the process. Complex problems cannot be addressed well with a top-down roll out of a change initiative or highly controlled implementations of a single person's brilliant idea. If at any point people are working on any stage of this alone, you are in danger territory and you need another pair of eyes on it at the very least.

Evaluation is your friend and your enemy. At every stage you need to be making meaning and evaluating what is going on, but it is critically important to use the right evaluation tools. Developmental evaluation tools – with their emphasis on collective sense making, rapid feedback loops and visible organizational and personal learning – are critical in any complexity project, and they are essential in the first three stages of this process. As you move to more and more stable projects, you can use more traditional summative evaluation methods, but you must always be careful not to manage towards targets. Such an error results in data like “We had a 62% participation rate in our diversity training” which tells you nothing about how you changed things, but can shift the project focus to trying to achieve a 75% participation rate next cycle. This is an especially pervasive metric in engagement processes. And so you must...

Monitor, monitor, monitor. Intervening in a complex system always means acting without the certainty that what you are doing is helpful. You need data and you need it on a short term and regular basis. This can be accomplished by formal and informal ongoing conversations and story captures about what is happening in the system.

These practices are nested, not linear. Always to remember that this is not a five step process to intervening in a complex system. In a large organization, you can expect all of these things to be going on all the time. Building the capacity for that is a kind of holy grail and would constitute a 21st century version of the Learning Organization in my books.