Developing effective program improvement strategies

A common approach to addressing a programmatic issue or challenge is to try something and then if it doesn't work, try something else. Continuous quality improvement (CQI) is a more systematic approach for designing strategies that are best able to address your improvement goals. In CQI, strategy development is three-pronged: (1) investigate the problem and identify root causes, (2) consult a range of sources to identify promising improvement ideas, and (3) specify the rationale for your strategy to ensure it aligns with your theory of improvement and to set your team up for piloting the strategy. This brief describes how HMRF grantees can develop improvement strategies and resources to support each step in the process. Please remember to discuss any proposed changes to your project design or implementation with your Family Assistance Program Specialist (FPS).

1. Investigate the problem and identify root causes

Often, when a program identifies a problem, staff are identifying a symptom of the problem rather than its cause. For example, low workshop attendance or difficulty recruiting a population of interest are both symptoms that flag deeper issues. Root cause analysis is a process to uncover those deeper issues, which is a critical step for effective strategy development. The key is to ask: Why is our program experiencing low attendance in our workshop? You can seek to answer that question by talking to staff, partners, and clients and exploring data in nFORM. Here are some tools to support your investigation and synthesize and prioritize what you learn:

nFORM reports allow your team to dig into the aggregate performance measures included in the quarterly reports sent to ACF. For instance, you can examine week-by-week or day-by-day average attendance for your workshop to understand when clients begin to drop off; you can also examine average attendance for a specific population group. nFORM data can provide your team with a more refined understanding of the "who, what, and where" related to a challenge. For more information about nFORM reports, please see Module VIII of the User Manual.

Empathy interviews can help your team understand the experiences of staff, partners, and/or clients in relation to the problem you are trying to address. Empathy interviews are unstructured, meaning most questions are not predetermined and the interviewer engages in free-flowing conversation. For example, an interviewer could begin with the question, "What makes it difficult for you to attend the workshop?" and then allow the client to direct the conversation from that point. The goal is to encourage storytelling to learn the in-depth perspectives of those affected by an issue. See page 4 for more information on empathy interviews.

Pulse surveys are a quick way to gather information about an issue from a larger number of clients at regular time points. For instance, you might administer a two- or three-question survey to learn more about engagement challenges with questions like, "Which parts of the lesson did you find most engaging today?" Closed-ended response options could include small-group discussion, games or activities, and role-playing. If you only need a one-time feedback survey, consider adding more questions. See page 5 for more information on pulse surveys.

Process maps help your team visualize an organizational process and identify the parts of the process that aren't working well. For instance, you might map out each step in your enrollment process, as the client experiences it, to identify bottlenecks. See page 6 for more information on process maps.

Fishbone diagrams are useful tools for synthesizing learning gathered through the investigation of programmatic issues (for example, information on attendance challenges gathered from empathy interviews or pulse surveys). Fishbone diagrams help teams visualize primary and secondary root causes of a problem. See page 7 for more information on fishbone diagrams.

Prioritization matrices are useful tools for selecting one or two primary root causes as the focus of your team's improvement work. To help your team prioritize which root cause to address first, you can map them on a matrix. Use one axis to denote impact—that is, the extent to which addressing the root cause will help your team address the problem. On the other axis, your team can map the effort required to address the root cause or your team's influence over it—that is, the extent to which the root cause is within your team's control. See page 8 for more information on prioritization matrices.

2. Consult a range of sources to identify promising strategy ideas

When you have prioritized a root cause to address first, the next step is to brainstorm about strategies that might address the root cause. Your team may already have a few ideas, but it's important to consult a range of sources for additional suggestions and to gather perspectives from outside the CQI team. Strong sources include staff, partners, and clients, as well as other practitioners, your FPS, training and technical assistance (TTA) support teams, and research from the field.

Facilitated strategy conversations with staff, partners, or clients

Your staff are very familiar with day-to-day processes and the challenges associated with them, so it is likely they will have ideas for how to improve. To generate ideas from staff, consider using exercises in design thinking.

The **creative matrix** is designed to engage staff in divergent thinking (idea generation) to develop ideas without considering programmatic constraints. See page 9 for more information on creative matrices. The key is to then guide staff toward convergent thinking, or prioritization, to highlight the most exciting but also practical ideas. You can use a prioritization matrix tool to support convergent thinking.

To gather suggestions from staff, clients, or partners more broadly, consider administering surveys or conducting interviews or focus groups to gather more general suggestions that you can use to inform detailed improvement strategies. If you conduct empathy interviews to learn about a challenge (Step 1), you can also use the interview to ask for suggestions (Step 2): "What would make this workshop more engaging for you?"

Resources and supports through the HMRF grant program

Practitioners share many implementation challenges, so you can draw on the broader HMRF community for ideas of strategies that have been successful. The HMRF learning community includes other grantees, ACF, and the TTA teams. Your FPS can connect you to other grantees that are experiencing similar challenges as well as to TTA liaisons who can provide you with in-depth support. Grantees have access to specific TTA related to programming, nFORM and data capacity, CQI, and local evaluations.

Research to identify evidence-informed strategies for addressing implementation challenges

Research from the field is a valuable source for identifying strategies backed by evidence. Consulting research doesn't have to mean combing through journal articles. Applied research studies and practice briefs are practical and accessible sources for finding strong, evidence-supported practices. OPRE's Strengthening Families, Healthy Marriage, & Responsible Fatherhood website shares a wide range of resources of interest to HMRF grantees. For example, these documents on OPRE's website focus on recruitment and retention practices:

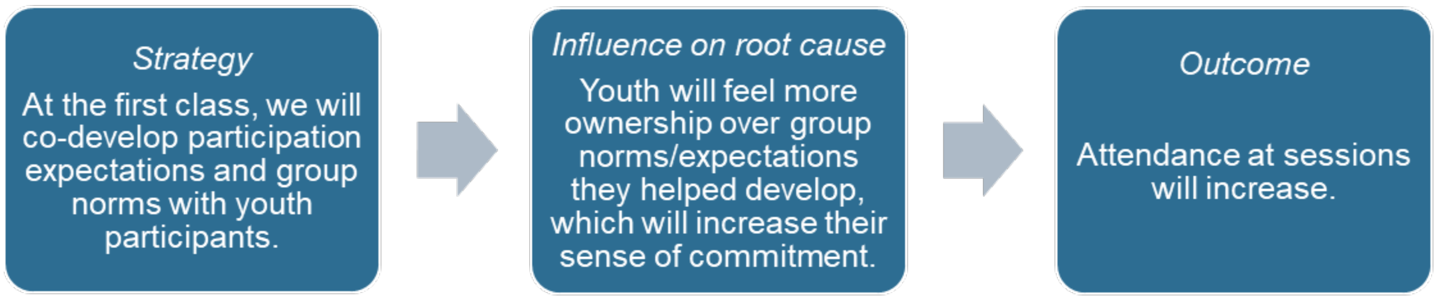
- Recruitment best practices: Developing Strong Recruitment Practices for HMRE Programs Serving Adults
- Partnership best practices: Forging Effective Responsible Fatherhood Partnerships

Once you have a list of potential ideas, prioritize the strongest ideas with your CQI implementation team by using a prioritization matrix.

3. Specify the rationale for your strategy

As a final step, it is important to be clear on how and why your team thinks a strategy will work. You should select an improvement strategy that you believe will address the priority root cause that your team identified in Step 1. For example, if you operate a youth program and your challenge is low program attendance, you may have identified as a key root cause that clients don’t feel a sense of commitment to the program and often prioritize other things over attending the workshop. Your strategy, then, should aim to build a sense of commitment. It may be helpful to map this out in a flow diagram to visualize your theory of improvement and discuss it with your team (see Figure 1*)* to get their input.

Figure 1. Specifying the rationale for an improvement strategy



Another benefit of mapping the rationale for how your strategy will influence the desired outcome is that it helps identify what data should be collected when your team conducts a road test of the strategy. A road test should measure the implementation of the strategy (Strategy box in Figure 1) and early signs that your strategy is addressing the root causes (Influence box). The Outcome box in Figure 1 is often what your team should be tracking to measure progress toward your SMART goal.

Empathy interviews

Empathy interviews are unstructured interviews that encourage storytelling to learn about the thoughts and experiences of clients, staff, and others affected by a program's challenge. To prepare for empathy interviews, you should develop a few overarching questions, identify respondents and interviewers, and determine logistics.

- **Question development.** Empathy interviews are open-ended conversations. However, your team should feel comfortable crafting a few high-level questions to guide the conversation. Questions should evoke stories. Try the following prompts if, for example, you are conducting empathy interviews to better understand low workshop attendance. You can repurpose each prompt when investigating other challenges.
  - What makes it difficult for you to attend the workshop?
  - How do you feel when you attend the workshop (included, energized, left out, confused)?
  - What do you like or dislike about the workshop?
- **Respondents.** Who do you need to talk to? Consider focusing on people who are the most or least affected by the challenge you are trying to address. To learn about attendance issues, for example, you might not need to hear from those with average attendance.
- **Interviewers.** When conducting empathy interviews, existing rapport and trust are often a benefit as these interviews sometimes ask respondents to share personal stories. Given this, a facilitator or case manager (or even a trusted former or current client, if appropriate) may be the best person to conduct the interview. In some cases, a neutral interviewer may be preferable. This is especially true when power dynamics are involved; for example, a program director interviewing a frontline staff member about program challenges could be problematic, even if the two have a good rapport.
- **Logistics.** Empathy interviews are best done in person so that you can create a safe space and observe your respondent's reactions. You can also conduct them virtually to accommodate the respondent.

Start the interview by introducing your goal of learning about their experiences and perspectives. Be clear about how you plan to use the information and keep it confidential. Spend some time building rapport, and then ask questions that are designed to evoke stories.

Tips:

- Keep the conversation to 15–20 minutes. Allow time to build rapport to elicit authentic responses but also keep the conversation brief. Limit interviews to about five or fewer open-ended questions.
- When asking questions, be neutral to avoid leading the respondent toward answering in a specific way.
- Don't just listen for what the respondents say—pay attention to body language. This can be more challenging in a virtual setting, so you might need to ask more prompts; for example, "What did you mean when you said …?"
- Be comfortable with silence. Respondents often need time to think.
- Recording the interview will allow you to capture thoughts and stay fully engaged. If you can't record or the client doesn't want to be recorded, try to take detailed notes.
- When you finish the interview, review your notes or listen to the recording and highlight significant or unexpected insights as well as common themes across interviews.
- There isn't a set number of interviews you must conduct. However, it is important to obtain a range of perspectives. For example, if your program has attendance challenges, you might talk with a client who is struggling to attend and a client who attends consistently. If the subject is potentially sensitive ("What are your barriers to attending?"), you should conduct a one-on-one interview. For less sensitive subjects ("When have you found the workshop to be most/least engaging?"), you could conduct a focus group.
- As with any new data collection, consult your FPS and, if applicable, your institutional review board (IRB) or organizational review board.

Pulse surveys

Pulse surveys are administered at regular intervals. They are useful tools for learning about challenges because they allow your team to gather a range of perspectives over time. Exit tickets are a tool for administering pulse surveys; you can give them out at the end of a session to gather feedback about the day's session. For an engagement challenge, for example, your team might administer exit tickets after each session, asking clients to rate their level of engagement with the day's session and note barriers to engagement. You can administer pulse surveys with staff and partners to capture perceptions, attitudes, or beliefs over time.

> **Pulse survey or empathy interview?**
>
> When learning about challenges, you may use empathy interviews or surveys. Surveys provide a greater breadth of responses but less depth than interviews, in that you hear from more people but get less detail and nuance. Given this, consider your needs when deciding whether to administer a pulse survey or conduct empathy interviews. For an attendance challenge, you may only need to hear from a few clients who are struggling to attend (interview); for an engagement challenge, you might want to hear from the whole group (survey).

To prepare a pulse survey, consider what you need to learn and limit your questions to those related to your needs. Pulse surveys should not be burdensome. To craft a strong survey:

- **Write questions clearly and in plain language.** To promote clarity:
  - Avoid leading questions that suggest how a person should respond ("Do you agree that having strong attendance makes it easier to engage in the course?").
  - Avoid double-barrel questions, or those that lump together different things ("Do you agree or disagree that the course is engaging and the facilitator is accessible?").
  - Pre-test the survey with a few clients for feedback about question clarity and ease of survey completion.
- **Develop questions that can be responded to and tabulated quickly.**
  - Use closed-ended questions, such as multiple choice or scaled questions.
    - For multiple choice, consider the range of responses you might get to an open-ended question and develop a list of options. If applicable, include an "other" option to capture additional responses, and provide a text field for respondents to specify what they mean.
    - Scaled questions ask about the extent to which respondents feel a certain way. You can include several statements for them to respond to (e.g. "This workshop is engaging."). The most common scale (also known as a Likert scale) is "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Consult with your data manager or local evaluator for other Likert scale options.
  - Use open-ended questions so respondents can provide feedback in their own words. However, include just one or two open-ended questions to reduce the burden of completing and analyzing the survey. Use open-ended questions when:
    - You're not sure how respondents will answer or don't want to assume how they will respond (e.g., "When did you feel most engaged during the class?").
    - You want to give respondents the opportunity to tell you anything not already covered on the survey (e.g., "What else would you like to share with us?").
    - To give respondents the opportunity to expand on a closed-ended question (e.g., "On a scale of 1 to 5, rate your level of engagement with today's session. Explain your rating.").

Tips:

- Tabulating survey responses can take time. Consult with your data manager on how best to compile, enter, and analyze the information you get back. This will help ensure the data you collect can be used to inform your improvement efforts.
- As with any new data collection, consult your FPS and, if applicable, your IRB or organizational review board.

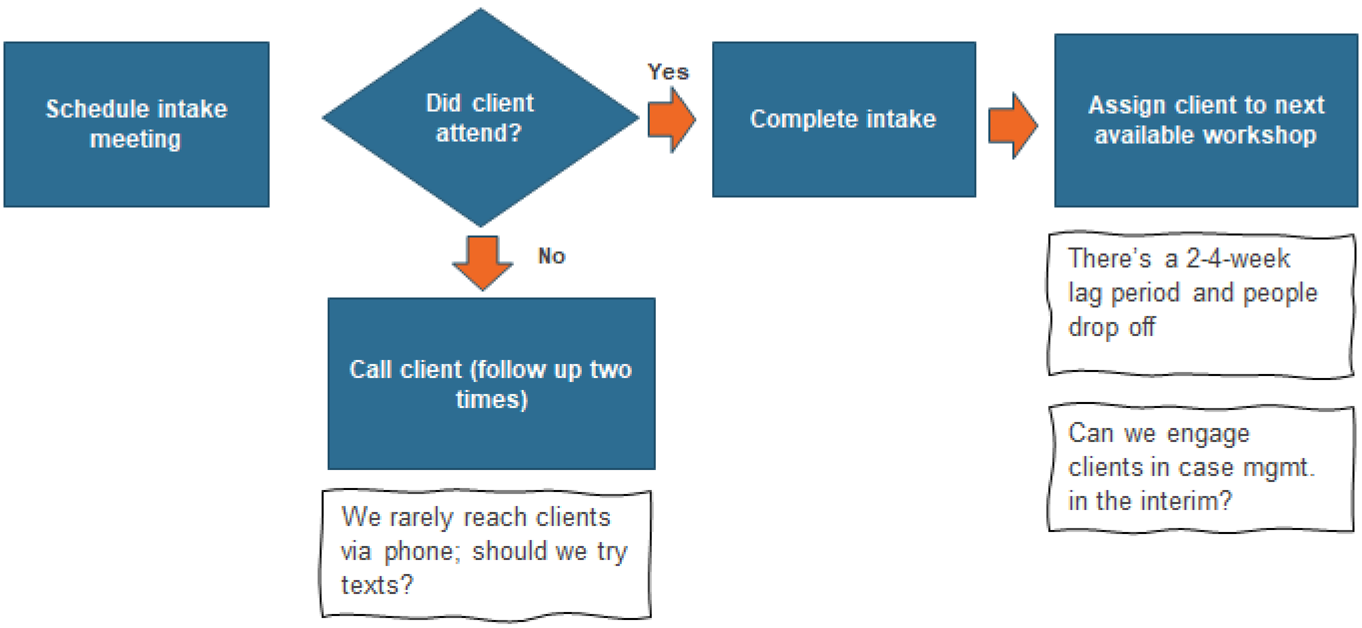
Process maps

Process maps are a tool for visualizing steps in a programmatic process to help your team identify opportunities for improvement. These are a useful tool when your program's challenge is related to a sequential process (for example, enrollment). To develop a process map:

1. Develop a flow diagram of your process for staff to review and react to.
2. Gather staff who are involved in the specific process and ask each person to use sticky notes to correct or add details to the draft process map.
3. Reconcile differences to create one agreed upon version of the process.
4. Under each step in the process map, ask staff to note challenges or ideas for improvement.
5. Prioritize ideas based on the feasibility of making the change and the level of impact you think it will have.

Figure 2 illustrates a map of a program's enrollment process, starting with the initial intake meeting. Below are "stickies" that staff might include to think about challenges and potential solutions for strengthening each step.

Figure 2. Process map exercise for enrollment process



Tips:

- Bring together as many staff in your program as possible. It is important to gain insights from a range of staff about how they undertake a process. In fact, process mapping sometimes reveals that staff with the same role are not following the same process, a problem that can be corrected through this exercise.
- Define the parameters of your process map before beginning. Will it be a high-level map that touches on just the key steps or a detailed map that delineates specific responsibilities of staff members? What are the boundaries of the process? For instance, when mapping enrollment, will you start with steps that occur during the recruitment process or with the initial intake meeting?
- Creating a technical map using proper shapes is not essential, as the value is in the exercise of mapping.
- If you created an overarching process map for your program during the grant planning period, you could use it as a starting place, and then zoom in on the specific step where you're having challenges by adding detail.
- To develop a process map remotely, use a virtual whiteboard, such as MURAL, Miro, or Google Jamboard.

Beyond your CQI efforts, the final process map can be a useful tool for training new staff or as a refresher for existing staff. Be sure to update the process map as you continue to make improvements.

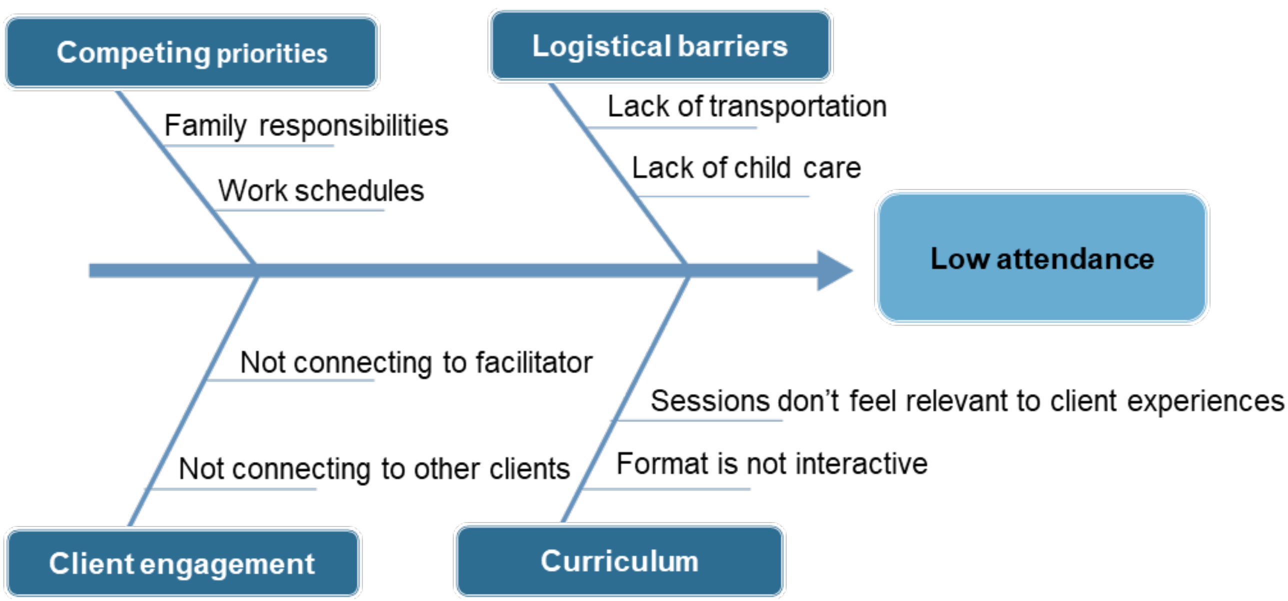
Fishbone diagram

A fishbone diagram is a tool to organize the root causes of a challenge. It is a great place to synthesize your team's learning about a challenge. For example, if your team conducts empathy interviews with clients or staff or administers a survey, what did you learn about what's driving the challenge? Draw on your staff's knowledge of the challenge, as well as any additional data gathering you conduct, to visualize your understanding of the challenge.

Steps for facilitating:

1. After investigating your program's challenge, gather your CQI team and other relevant partners.
2. Draw the head of the fish and list the main problem or challenge (see Figure 3). Drawing on your investigations and knowledge of the issue, brainstorm root causes of the challenge.
3. Consider grouping the root causes into broad categories as shown in Figure 3. This can be useful for strategy development as it can help your team come up with strategies that address multiple root causes. For example, when adapting your curriculum, your team can consider how to simultaneously address both challenges listed for "Curriculum" in Figure 3.
4. In some cases, your team might want to break down a root cause even further. For example, for "Client engagement," one cause is "Not connecting to other clients." There could be several reasons why clients are not feeling a sense of belonging within the larger group. To list sub-causes, create additional fishbones as needed.

Figure 3. Fishbone diagram



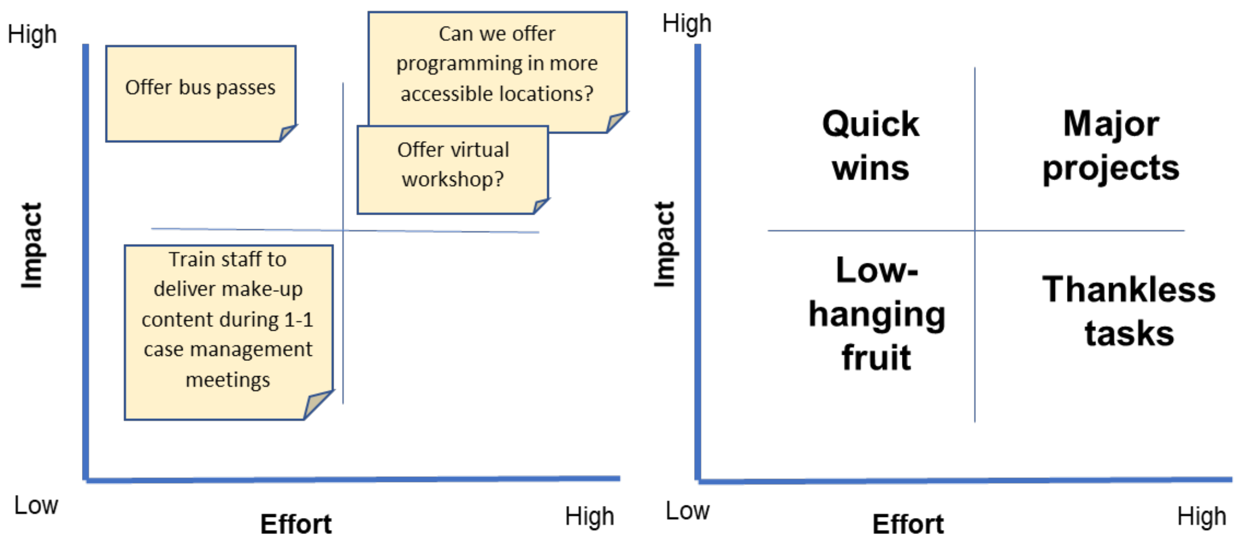
Prioritization matrix

Though often referred to as an impact-to-effort matrix, matrices broadly can be used to plot items (such as root causes or strategy ideas) along two axes to help with prioritization. For root causes, for example, your team may consider (1) the level of *influence* you have over the root cause and (2) the *impact* that addressing it would have on the challenge. For strategy ideas, your team may consider (1) the level of *effort* required to implement the strategy and (2) the *impact* that implementing the strategy would have on the challenge.

Steps for facilitating:

1. Determine your axes. What are the important factors to consider? If you are using a matrix for root causes or improvement strategies, we recommend the axis considerations listed above.
2. Write your root causes or strategy ideas on stickies (real or virtual) and ask your team to collectively decide where to place each sticky on the matrix. Because placement related to the level of effort, influence, or impact is highly subjective, it is possible people will come to different conclusions. Part of the value of this activity is the discussion within your team; it is less about getting the placement right and more about using the tool as a mechanism to help your team prioritize.
3. After you have placed all the stickies on the matrix, interpret priorities based on the axes you used. In Figure 4, the matrix on the left illustrates how a program might place stickies with improvement strategy ideas on a matrix. For an impact-to-effort matrix, the figure on the right helps guide interpretation. Quick wins are almost always worth trying. Major projects hold promise and may be worth the effort to plan but will be longer-term strategies to implement. Low-hanging fruit are strategies worth trying if staff have capacity while planning for major projects. Thankless tasks should be avoided.

Figure 4. Impact-to-effort matrix to prioritize ideas for enhancing session accessibility



Creative matrix

The creative matrix is a design thinking activity to help teams develop ideas to address an issue or challenge. It is particularly useful when your staff don't have immediate suggestions, or you want to break away from conventional thinking to address the challenge.

A creative matrix adds question prompts and solution categories to the conversation that can be helpful in generating thinking. It's called a creative matrix because participants are encouraged to suggest all ideas, regardless of how big or far-fetched they seem. By removing mental constraints from the conversation (for example, Can we afford it? Is it feasible?), participants are free to consider a broad range of ideas. Then, a facilitator can help the group prioritize the most exciting and promising—but also practical—ideas.

Steps for facilitating:

- Draw a matrix (maximum of two columns and five rows) on poster paper or, if virtual, on a whiteboard like MURAL, Miro, or Google Jamboard.
- Develop a *How Might We?* question for your challenge (see box). Put your question as a column header.
- In the rows, create categories for enabling solutions. These are often tools or processes that support the implementation of a strategy and could include things like technology, training, or policies. *Tip*: Include a wildcard category to allow for ideas that don't fit within the categories you provide.
- Give participants sticky notes and provide 10–15 minutes for them to write improvement strategy ideas on the stickies.
- Cluster the ideas into broader categories if you have overlapping ideas and then prioritize ideas. Ask participants to vote on their top three ideas. The ideas with the most votes should be explored further.

Developing effective *How Might We?* questions

The question should encourage ambitious thinking but be specific enough to give your team parameters related to the goal. For example, if your challenge is attendance, the question, "How might we make our workshop so engaging that clients won't want to miss it?" would generate different ideas from, "How might we make it easier for clients to access our workshop?" Consider your root cause when developing your *How Might We?* question (for example, engagement or access) and craft a question that will prompt ideas to address the root cause.

Figure 5. Creative matrix

	How might we make our workshop so engaging that clients won't want to miss it?
Technology	Let clients use cell phones to participate in web-based quizzes
Training	Pair new facilitators with an experienced peer; Provide facilitators with training on facilitation strategies
Wildcard!	Bring in guest speakers for specific lessons; Find out client hobbies and incorporate references into lessons