CASE STUDY   C-0103

An Adaptive Recycling Policy

Adaptive Methods for Implementation (a constructed narrative to teach about adaptive methods, based on actual case experience)

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A Frustrating Recycling Policy

The mayor of Blueville was elected on the basis of a strong environmental message. She promised, especially, to promote recycling in the city—reducing the amount of plastic goods on city streets. There was no recycling, historically, so her administration had a lot of work to do.

Upon taking office, her staff approached a consulting firm that had advised other cities with prominent recycling strategies and asked for a 'plan of action'. The consultants' advice was clear: there are many private entities that will buy recyclables—especially plastics—but the challenge for a city government lies in collecting the recyclables.

Given this advice, the Mayor's office established a contract with a private recycling firm, who would pay for recycled goods collected by the city, and asked her team to develop a plan to collect recycled goods in the city. This seemed a great solution to the problem of having no recycling in the city.

The plan to collect recycled goods had two main elements: (i) The city procured recycling boxes for every constituent (individuals and businesses) to use in collected recyclables; (ii) The city set up collection points at four city buildings (the City Hall, Police Station, Registrar's Office, and School) where citizens were asked to deliver their recyclables.

The mayor was excited by this initiative, which seemed affordable and practical and would solve the city's problem (which they saw as 'having too much plastic waste on city streets').

Unfortunately, a year went by and the policy did not yield the kind of results the Mayor had hoped. The amount of plastic waste on city streets did not seem to decrease at all, partly because very few constituents seemed to collect and deliver recyclables (evident in the low level of recycled goods collected at the four city buildings in the year).

The Mayor was convinced that the general solution was the right one – "we just need to collect recycled goods, especially plastics"—but she recognized that her administration's policy was not working as she had hoped. So, she asked them to pivot: "Go and find out why the policy is not working, and fix it!"

An Adaptive Pivot

The mayor's staff held a short one day retreat to reflect on their new orders, as part of a team that would help foster a better understanding of the way forward.

This team included two city employees from the environmental management bureau (responsible for the policy), two members from the Mayor's Office (representing her, as the one demanding change), and three members from busines and civil society (who, it was agreed, needed to be involved as users and potential end-beneficiaries of the policy).

Scoping

The team members all agreed that the problem they were addressing was the same as the Mayor had identified a year earlier, but stated it more clearly than before: 'Too much plastic is on city streets because of low levels of constituent recycling.' They also agreed that the general solution they were pursuing was still a good one: 'The city needs to collect recycled goods from constituents and sell these to private firms that do recycling.'

They agreed, further, that the key to success lay in uncovering the reasons why constituents were not using the recycling collection options in the city and then addressing these reasons.

Given this understanding, the team started engaging with constituents—asking them why they did not recycle (or use the city's recycling collection opportunities). They did this by holding focus group meetings at the local Chamber of Business, meeting with groups of school teachers, interviewing people at local bus stops and coffee shops, and more. Their interviews were open- ended, asking for stories about why the policy was not working. And they heard a lot of these stories, which included the following, most prominent, messages:

→ "We do not know what goods can be recycled and what can't be recycled."

→ "We do not know where the recycling points are."

→ "We cannot get to the recycling points."

→ "It is difficult—and costly—to get products to the recycling points."

→ "We do not have an incentive to do all the work associated with storing and then delivering recyclables to the recycling points."

Team members did not only listen to these stories; they tried to 'get into the shoes' of those they were listening to; so as to really understand and appreciate the message. For example, when a teacher told them she did not know which goods counted as 'recyclables', they assembled a selection of products and asked her to explain which she would consider 'recyclables' (and where she was confused). In another instance, they asked a business owner to show them how they would store, pack and then deliver recyclables to recycling points (to get a sense of the cost and difficulty of doing this).

These 'learned and earned' stories helped the team identify what they called missing 'capabilities' in their policy intervention (where they defined a 'capability' as the empowered ability to do something). The policy did not empower constituents with the abilities to know what was a recyclable, for instance, or to know where recycling points were, or to access these recycling points easily or cost efficiently; and the policy did not empower the city with the ability to incentivize constituents to do the work associated with recycling (but instead just assumed that this work would be done).

On the basis of this work, the team developed a very specific point of view on the challenge they were facing and established a new 'Policy Statement' to present to the Mayor. This statement listed the overall goal of the policy and the five missing 'capabilities' that would serve as key focal points for their activities. They explained that their policy work would need to establish these capabilities and identified a 'satisfaction criteria' to meet in respect of each capability (as in the table below).

THE TEAM'S POLICY STATEMENT

OVERALL POLICY GOAL	COLLECTION OF PLASTIC RECYCLABLES INCREASES BY 50% IN THE YEAR, WITH 80% OF CONSTITUENTS ACTIVELY CONTRIBUTING TO COLLECTION EFFORT
Missing capability and supporting story	**Satisfaction criteria**
1. Constituents know what is a recyclable: "We do not know what goods can and can't be recycled."	80% of constituents in focus groups can confidently identify recyclables in a product set.
2. Constituents know where recycling points are: "We do not know where the recycling points are."	80% of constituents in focus groups can confidently identify recycling locations.
3. Constituents know how to access recycling points: "We cannot to get to recycling points."	80% of constituents in focus groups are confident in getting to recycling points.
4. Constituents can get recyclables to recycling points: "It is difficult and costly to get products to recycling points."	80% of constituents in focus groups can get products to recycling points within 500 yards.
5. The city cannot incentivize constituent compliance "We lack incentive to do all the work associated with storing and then delivering recyclables to the recycling points."	80% of constituents in focus groups feel motivated and incentivized to comply with policy.

The team did not proffer solutions to the missing capabilities (as they were unsure of what these solutions would be) but instead described the process they would adopt to find such solutions: They would work with constituents to identify ideas that might be solutions, experiment with these ideas in short bursts of two weeks, and report regularly on progress (with the goal of satisfying the criteria associated with each missing capability). They assumed that it would take between four and six 'bursts' to establish each capability (though they kept this assumption loose, having never done such work before).

With this strategy in mind, they provided the Mayor with a work breakdown structure that identified which capability they would address and when they would address it over the coming six months. This work breakdown structure would form the basis of their work and reporting relationship in that period and also helped the team (and Mayor) develop a budget for the work and a narrative to use in communicating what the City was doing in this policy space.

In developing this work breakdown, the team decided to ensure they were never working on establishing more than two capabilities at a time (given the limited size of their team) and opted to start with Capabilities 1 and 5 (ensuring constituents know what a recyclable is and that the city can incentivize compliance with a recycling policy) and then to move to capabilities 2, 3, and 4 related to recycling location and access.

This seemed to be the most logical sequence for the work, given views that capabilities 1 and 5 were the most important to establish and thus needed their most immediate attention. Team members were actually even of the mindset that capabilities 2, 3 and 4 might follow if capabilities 1 and 5 were in place (Thinking that constituents would work out their location and access issues if they knew what the recycling policy was all about and had incentives to comply).

	Month 1		Month 2		Month 3		Month 4		Month 5		Month 6	
Capability 1	Burst 1	Burst 2	Burst 3	Burst 4								
Capability 2	Burst 1	Burst 2	Burst 3	Burst 4	Burst 5	Burst 6						
Capability 3					Burst 1	Burst 2	Burst 3	Burst 4	Burst 5	Burst 6		
Capability 4							Burst 1	Burst 2	Burst 3	Burst 4		
Capability 5									Burst 1	Burst 2	Burst 3	Burst 4

Iteration plans (for each 'burst')

Team members wrote a brief iteration plan in the first morning of each burst, identifying what actions they planned to take in the two-week period, with whom, and with what expectation (especially noting what they hoped to learn or achieve in the time). The iteration plan also identified dates and times that team members would meet during the two weeks to review progress and lessons learned as they took action, how and when they would engage constituent focus groups (to assess the impact of actions), and the date and time of a final 'burst review' or reflection (where they would meet with the Mayor to discuss progress).

For example, the team members working on establishing capability 5 (incentivizing constituent compliance) identified two starting activities in their first 'burst'; establishing competitions for firm and neighborhood-level recycling collection. They planned to design the ideas in their first few days of work and take the idea to focus groups in the next few days, with a plan to execute, stopping every two days to update other team members on progress. They would then meet the Mayor on the last Friday of a two-week period to report on what they had done, what they had learned, and what was next.

This detail was sufficient to ensure accountability and direction but was also limited enough to not take up too much time 'in planning' (but instead allow a springboard for the teams to work).

Iteration execution

The teams acted on the ideas in their iteration plans in each 'burst', following the plan where possible, reflecting on progress as the iteration advanced, and adapting within the iteration when lessons emerged that required change (frustrating progress or creating new opportunities). They also kept records of all lessons encountered and changes made.

For example, the team members working on establishing capability 5 (incentivizing constituent compliance) in the first burst engaged a select set of firms and neighborhood groups to ask about whether they would participate in a 'competition' around recycling collection. They found a strong response to such and immediately began working with these groups to design the competitions. Through this, they learned that firms and neighborhood groups could be made interested in the idea of 'competitive collection' and they learned some ideas on what this competition might look like. They kept a record of all the people involved, how much these people committed to the process, and what new ideas and resources emerged in the work.

Iteration reflection

The iterations lasted two weeks, and culminated in a meeting with the Mayor. Teams informed her about their progress at these meetings, telling her about lessons learned and results achieved. They were also able to tell her if they were 'on track' with the six month work breakdown and could brief her on the actions proposed in the next 'burst'.

The fundamental question in all of these meetings was, "Have we reached the satisfaction criteria in respect of any of the focal capabilities, or are we en route to achieving these criteria?" The conversation around this question helped the Mayor and her staff construct a message around the policy progress—for constituents, staff and other political allies—which was very important given that they were working in an unorthodox manner.

An example of this meeting was the team working on establishing capability 5 (incentivizing constituent compliance) in the first burst. It met the Mayor at the end of the first two week period and reported that it had not yet reached satisfaction criteria but that key firm and neighborhood counterparts were identified and a competition 'prototype' was designed for experimentation in burst 2. As they progressed, these meetings involved more robust reporting (where the prototype had been tried in burst 2, the prototype was improved upon and scaled somewhat in burst 3, and so forth).

The recursive loop

At the end of the reflection meetings, teams that had yet to achieve 'satisfaction criteria' went back into the iteration plan for a new burst to continue their work. They did this for as many iterations as they needed to meet the satisfaction criteria or for as long as the Mayor was willing to support the work. This time period tended to be correlated with the original Work Breakdown Structure, which the mayor had approved (to give everyone minimal certainty about her support). However, the team found solutions that achieved 'satisfaction criteria' in shorter amounts of time when it came to capabilities 1 and 3 and the team needed two more weeks to establish 'satisfaction criteria' for capability 5.

The final report

The team produced a final report at the end of the six month period. It was called the final report because brief interim reports had been produced every few weeks throughout the six month process. The final report outlined details of what was achieved—especially in terms of the new capabilities that were established.

The team also reported on new relationships developed, new lessons learned, and new policy opportunities and challenges identified. The latter 'new opportunities and challenges' informed a list of as the new 'missing capabilities' they felt the city should address. Using language from 'agile' theory, this was termed their 'capability backlog' (the list of areas demanding action).

OVERALL POLICY ACHIEVEMENT	COLLECTION OF PLASTIC RECYCLABLES INCREASED BY 60% (IN WEIGHT), MONTH-BY-MONTH, WHICH WAS BELOW TARGET BUT CONSTITUTED A SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT
Focal capabilities and supporting story	Satisfaction status, key products, and criteria
1. Constituents know what is a recyclable: "We do not know what goods can and can't be recycled."	Fully satisfied through new leaflets describing recyclables, as circulated in the town, with 100% of constituents in focus groups using these leaflets to identify recyclables in a random product set.
2. Constituents know where recycling points are: "We do not know where the recycling points are."	Fully satisfied through new leaflets describing recycling locations, as circulated in the town, with 90% of constituents in focus groups using these leaflets to identify recycling locations.
3. Constituents know how to access recycling points: "We cannot to get to recycling points."	Fully satisfied through an expansion in recycling points, and leaflets and location-specific signage describing how to access recycling locations, with 80% of constituents in focus groups able to access recycling points.
4. Constituents can get recyclables to recycling points: "It is difficult and costly to get products to recycling points."	Fully satisfied through an expansion in recycling points, with 80% of constituents in focus groups being within 500 yards of a point.
5. The city cannot incentivize constituent compliance: "We lack incentive to do all the work associated with storing and then delivering recyclables to the recycling points."	Fully satisfied through firm and neighborhood recycling collection competitions, leading to 80% of constituents in focus groups being motivated, incentivized to comply with policy.

Conclusion

In six months the team made significant progress designing and implementing new policy solutions that were not effectively considered in the prior two-year initiative. They did this by learning together in an iterative manner. The process led to the identification of new policy needs and can thus not be considered 'complete'. It was, however, an improvement on prior efforts.