

IMPROVE-ing Leadership! Resources from the Office of Family Assistance Project IMPROVE Leadership Initiative

Across the country, leaders of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and related programs are operating in complex, rapidly changing service environments. Programs often have competing priorities when serving clients, supporting staff, and working with community partners. With all these priorities, programs often struggle to cultivate the skills and abilities of current and emerging leaders.

In fall 2022, the Office of Family Assistance Project IMPROVE Leadership Initiative aimed to meet these challenges. The Leadership Initiative provided state, local, and Tribal TANF program leaders with a leadership framework, tools, and practices to make evidence-driven decisions to improve their programs. The Leadership Initiative consisted of a series of content sessions, tool demonstrations, and optional individual support sessions with three goals in mind:

- Connect current and emerging leaders interested in making evidence-driven decisions
- Train leaders to use frameworks and process models to cast a vision, document and manage program components, and support continuous improvement
- Build a leadership practice that strengthens staff skills, improves job retention, and supports meaningful careers

To develop the content for the Leadership Initiative, Project IMPROVE drew on a review of research on leadership, organizational change, and management practices; input from human services and workforce leaders and practitioners; and best practices in translating research to practice. To support leaders and emerging leaders in TANF and related programs, this document briefly describes and links to key resources from the Leadership Initiative.

Project IMPROVE

Sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), Project IMPROVE provides individual technical assistance and other supports to help Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and related programs build capacity to use and produce evidence to improve their programs. Project IMPROVE is led by Mathematica and The Adjacent Possible—nationally recognized research and learning partners. The OFA Project IMPROVE Leadership Initiative was one of many opportunities Project IMPROVE has offered state and local TANF and related programs. To learn more, see the Project IMPROVE page on OFA's [Peer TA website](#).

Topics and links to key resources from the Leadership Initiative

Six content sessions formed the core of the Leadership Initiative. The sessions covered key aspects of strong leadership in human services organizations. The Leadership Initiative included demonstrations of three tools leaders can use to clarify and manage change efforts. Full materials for each of the content sessions and tool demonstrations are available [on the OFA Peer TA website](#). The content below briefly described what the materials cover.



"[A leader is] anyone who takes responsibility for finding potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential."

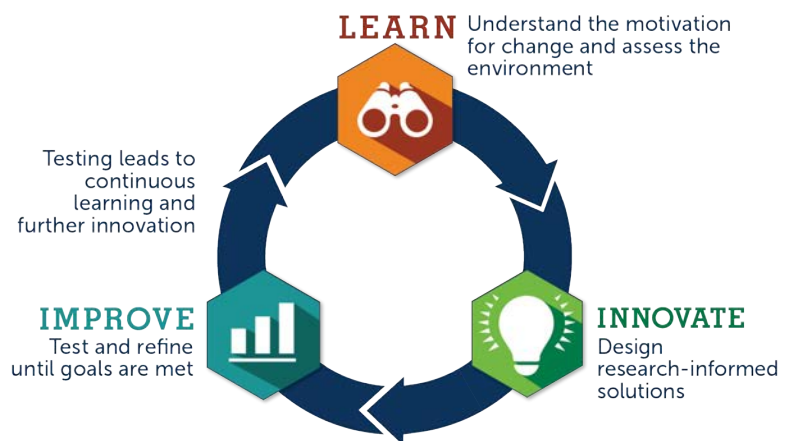
Brené Brown

Content Session 1: Strategic and visionary leadership

This session covered key components of strategic and visionary leadership: (1) articulate and embody a vision, (2) define and adapt strategies, and (3) be proactive and responsive to the environment.

Content Session 2: Tools for managing change and continuous improvement

Experiencing unexpected changes can feel like the stages of processing grief: shock, denial, depression, experiment, decision, and integration. This session presented LI² [an evidence-based framework](#) and process that leaders can use to turn change into an opportunity for growth.



Content Session 3: Operational management—defining and implementing our program components

Operational management is a core function of leadership that requires leaders to implement processes, resources, and systems efficiently and effectively, and then actively manage performance in service of the mission and vision. This session explored operational management as a key part of leadership and presented potential solutions to common challenges in operational management.

Content Session 4: Creating an environment that supports and advances leaders of color

Creating and fostering an environment that empowers leaders of colors requires deep reflection and intentionality on all levels. When approaching conversations about this topic, it is valuable to establish discussion norms that create a safe space for vulnerability and authentic expression. This session modeled and described techniques to create an environment that supports and advances leaders of color.

Content Session 5: Developmental supervision

Developmental supervision is an approach to supervision that supportively guides staff professional development toward pursuing goals focused on growing core competencies and skills directly related to staff roles and responsibilities. This session covered why and how to implement this approach to professional development—for leaders and those they lead!



“Management consists of controlling a group or a set of entities to accomplish a goal. Leadership refers to an individual’s ability to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward organizational success. Influence and inspiration separate leaders from managers, not power and control.”

Vineet Nayar

Content Session 6: Changing culture and practice

There are many new and evolving challenges for TANF leaders—including pressures to reengage participants, changing labor markets, staff turnover and burnout, and changes in TANF caseloads. This session covered how proactive leadership, supervision practice, and emphasis on equity can help leaders transform program culture and organizational practice to meet these challenges.

Tool demonstrations

The tool demonstration sessions focused on tools for (1) articulating a vision for a program or team and (2) creating a road map for change to understand how program components are linked to short- and long-term results.