Does research support, or place a burden on, your organization?

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It's time to talk about our relationship with research

Who we are

- "Hybrid" experience – researchers working within health organizations
- Community organizations, program management, Winnipeg Regional Health Authority, Universities of Manitoba and Alberta
- Experience from a number of different perspectives

"We have had over 100 requests from researchers to partner with them on COVID questions, and we have absolutely no resources. We said no to all of them….."

CEO of a large health authority

Outline

- Overview of new guidebook "Its time to talk"
- How it came to be, who it is for
- Importance of clarity of concepts
- Before developing a response…
- Responding to requests
- Developing a proactive plan
- Discussion/questions

How the guidebook came about

- Limited information on health leadership perspectives[1]
- Research project aimed at gathering these experiences[2]
- Guidance & testing findings
- Beyond describing challenges: identifying action

1. Bowen S, Botting I, Graham ID, Huebner, LA. *Beyond "Two Cultures": Guidance for Establishing Effective Researcher/Health System Partnerships.* Int J Health Policy Manag 2017, 6(1), 27–42

2. Bowen S, Botting I, Graham I, MacLeod M, de Moissac D, Harlos K, Leduc B, Ulrich C, Knox J. *Experience of health leadership in partnering with university-based researchers in Canada – A Call to "Re-imagine" Research.* Int J Health Policy Manag 2019, 8(12), 684–699.

Some key research findings

- Research often experienced as irrelevant
- Divided responsibility for knowledge-generating activities
- Lack of consensus on 'research'
- Different emphasis on barriers to partnership
  - Organizational stress
  - Limited preparation of researchers
- Need for multi-system action

Bowen S, Botting I, Graham I, MacLeod M, de Moissac D, Harlos K, Leduc B, Ulrich C, Knox J. *Experience of health leadership in partnering with university-based researchers in Canada – A Call to "Re-imagine" Research. Int J Health Policy Manag 2019, 8(12), 684–699.* https://www.ijhpm.com/article_3656.html

There is a strong expectation that researchers will arrive, well, with humility, and we haven't always had that experience. This might sound negative but there is at times the attitude that they're gifting us with their presence …..I think there is an expectation that there be, like, a gratitude that they're here, so then that we'll serve their interest to some degree.

It's time to talk about

Our Relationship With Research *(and the people who do it for a living)*

A guide to making research activities and investments work for—rather than overwhelm—**your health organization**

Typical researcher…. tells us "it's time to talk" and then hands us a report. Probably doesn't even see the irony in it.

Sarah Bowen   **Ian D. Graham**   **Ingrid Botting**

Health research can be a real asset

Research and partnerships can support organizations in achieving their objectives by helping to:

- meet organizational goals
- improve patient quality of care
- optimize organizational performance
- inform difficult management decisions
- support health equity initiatives

But, it requires proactive action to benefit

Unless organizations take charge of research relationships, it is unlikely these benefits will be achieved, and may cost the organization:

Time   **Money**   **Frustration**

But what is research really?

There are often major differences—even within the same organization—in individual understandings of what "research" is and how it relates to other knowledge-generating activities such as Quality Improvement (QI) and evaluation in a learning organization.

Quick Poll: What challenges do you find with research?

- None

- Not useful to priorities we have

- Do not have time/resources

- Other

**Quick poll:
For what kinds
of decisions
does your
organization
use research?**

- Priority setting

- Program/organizational planning

- Advocacy

- Other

- DK/it varies from area to area

Identify what we want out of our relationship with research

Before taking any action, it's important to consider the organization's commitment to research, the visibility of this commitment, and its readiness to engage in research development activities.

Determine where you are now

Organizational research-related initiatives (whether in response to external requests or initiated from within the organization) are sometimes developed reactively, without consideration of where the organization finds itself at any particular point in time. As a result, an organization may resort to adopting initiatives similar to those found within other organizations, whether or not these are the best fit for their particular context.

It is also helpful to reflect on the organization's current position(s) on its role in research, recognizing that organizational engagement with the different "pillars" of research (clinical, health services, population health) may vary significantly.

Some common positions are outlined in **Table 1** on the following page, which also includes suggestions of how research can support the organization in each of these positions, and implications to consider for each. These positions are not mutually exclusive (an organization or program may adopt more than one), and various areas or levels within the organization may be at different positions at a specific point in time.

> " *What we more often find are researchers who have research interests that are not exactly aligned to those of the organization, to the organization's needs. Then, collaboration is harder to establish.* "

Is commitment to research, or specific research-related activities, clearly identified in the organization's mission, values, and strategic plan?

Is more discussion needed?

....

What is the commitment of those in key leadership (board, executive) roles to the importance of research to the organization?

How knowledgeable are organizational leaders about the range of research approaches and methods?

....

What is the organization's (or program's) current involvement in research? Is there a comprehensive inventory of research projects or collaborations with which the organization is involved?

How did these come about? How are they intended to help the organization achieve its goals? How are they supported?

Questions to consider

fig 2.

Current position	Current challenges	What issues should we consider?	How can research help meet this challenge?
We depend on standards set by other bodies (e.g. provincial/ professional standards and guidelines) to ensure quality care.	Ensuring that standards are met	Without careful attention to implementation in our specific context, standards may not be met. We may also be approached by external players with research-related requests, how will we respond?	There is research that has explored the most effective ways to communicate standards in ways that are relevant to the audience (often called *knowledge translation*) and identify effective Implementation strategies (*implementation science*). Evaluation research expertise can inform quality assurance and improvement efforts.
We are committed to ensuring our programs reflect the latest research in order to optimize the care we provide.	Accessing and evaluating current research in a timely and ongoing manner Ensuring findings are assessed, in collaboration with organizational leadership, for applicability to the local context Facilitating uptake of findings (including needed organizational change)	Research must be assessed for its applicability in our specific organizational/program context. We may also be approached by external bodies for research-related requests.	There is research on effective ways of assessing and adapting research for applicability to a specific context, and facilitating uptake and effective implementation (knowledge translation and implementation science).
We want to respond appropriately to requests from external sources for access to our data, patients or sites, or to partner with them on research projects.	Clarifying organizational goals and priorities related to research Developing, implementing, communicating, and evaluating organizational policy, processes and structures to support consistent organizational research action	Without organization-wide policy and associated procedures, our managers and clinicians may make individual decisions. This may result in a) additional stress on burdened staff/ programs, b) overcommitment of organizational resources, c) unforeseen issues requiring management intervention, and d) missed opportunities to share findings with potential relevance to other areas of the organization. Responding to external requests alone does not address our internal needs for knowledge: we may want to focus on our own priorities rather than be placed in the reactive position of responding to external requests.	Evidence-informed research policy can provide structure for consistent action in response to organizational priorities. Effective research ethics and access/impact review processes ensure policy is followed, the organization is protected, and research useful to the organization is facilitated. Research coordination skills facilitate processes, positive communication, and organizational knowledge of research partners.
We would like to play an active role in research activities that could help address the major problems facing our organization.	Developing a model for research participation that is feasible for the organization and supports organizational goals and priorities	We need to be clear on our priorities, and realistically assess the needs/potential for developing in-house research expertise, or ability to play an active role as effective research partner with external research bodies. We will also need to develop strategies to ensure all program areas are supported in staying current with quality research in their areas, and to respond to external research-related requests.	Research expertise to undertake, coordinate and oversee activities Knowledge of research evidence on effective research partnerships

Clarify research priorities before making commitments

An important first step is for organizations to clarify their priorities and keep these as a focus in negotiating research relationships

Each organization must develop a plan appropriate for its needs

First, ensure these three interwoven preconditions are met

There are three interconnected preconditions associated with the development of effective organizational research-related action

Commitment to the importance of research from organizational leadership

A shared vision of the benefits of research and research partnerships to the organization

Organizational consensus on a broad definition of "research" and its fit with other knowledge-generating activities
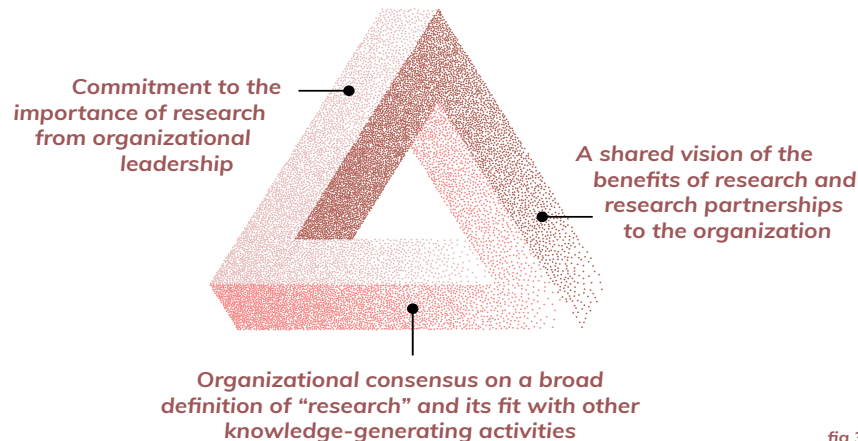
fig 3.

Organizations are advised to undertake activities to ensure these three preconditions are met before moving on to developing a concrete plan. While discussed separately, these can most usefully be considered as iterative, interwoven activities.

Commitment to the importance of research

Commitment, as well a broad understanding of various types of research, from the highest levels of organizational leadership—Board, CEO, executive management, and clinical leads—is essential. Recent research has identified organizational leadership as a critical factor in establishing and supporting effective research partnerships, as well as in creating a research-positive organizational culture.[2] If initiatives to promote greater research involvement are generated from staff or middle management, an early task will be to develop a strategy for enhancing research awareness and capacity at the Board and Executive levels.

> *I've come to be a big believer that there has to be understanding from the most senior leadership within the organization. I don't think I could emphasize that enough, that if the leadership doesn't buy in, I don't think there's a chance of success.*

To ensure a strong foundation it is important to ensure:

Inclusion of key stakeholders in planning

Clarity on the organization's planned research role and approach to research engagement

Effective communication of the organization's position

Development of appropriate policy, structure and processes to support effective research initiatives
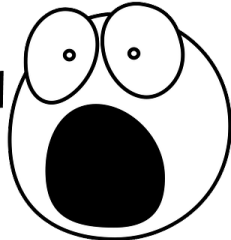
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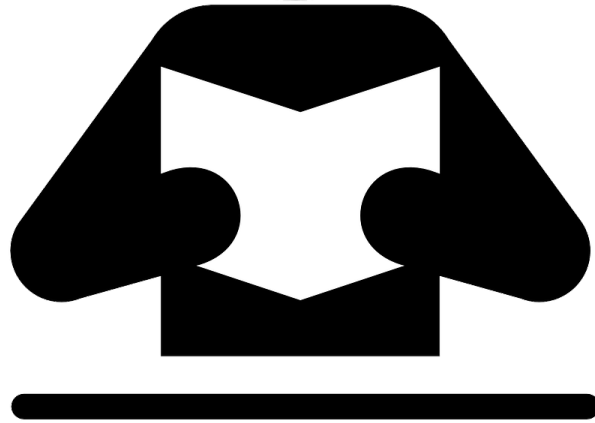
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Effective communication of the organization's position

Development of appropriate policy, structure and processes to support effective research initiatives

LISTEN TO me!

After an organization has clarified what it wishes its role in research to be (and what challenges it is currently facing with research requests and potential research partnerships), leaders will want to carefully consider how they will communicate their stance around health organization-academic collaboration.

Scenario	Example message
An organization is getting many, and varied, requests for partnership. The staff approached are not always the appropriate contacts.	"As an organization we are deeply committed to supporting research, but have clear policies for approving staff and organizational resources for any particular project. These policies and procedures can be found at..."
An organization wishes to communicate some limits on the type of research activities in which it will become involved.	"Given all the demands on the organization at present, we will only become involved in research activities that our senior management feels addresses our current priorities. The proposal for X will need to be submitted to Y for review."
An organization is open to engaging in research partnerships and making contacts with researchers but wants to proactively communicate what they expect from those looking to partner.	"We are most interested in working with researchers who are willing to take on the priorities of our organization, and work with us to ensure that results are available in a timely way. We encourage researchers to become more familiar with our programs and priorities by (X)."
An organization wishes to take a proactive role in proposing potential research projects and encouraging appropriate research partnerships.	"We want to develop ongoing relationships with researchers who are interested in working collaboratively with us to address issues of concern to us. We would also be interested in hearing about your research interests and experience. We would invite you to (X)..."
An organization has decided its main research focus will be to develop in-house research expertise.	"In order to better fulfill our mandate of quality health care delivery, we will invest in in-house research capacity to ensure that we can address key issues as they arise, and help build longer term research relationships. We hope that you may be open to collaborating with us on our organizational priorities in the future."

Consistent and clear decision-making is key; a decision tree can help

Most organizations receive unsolicited requests for researcher access to data or sites, or to partner on specific research projects
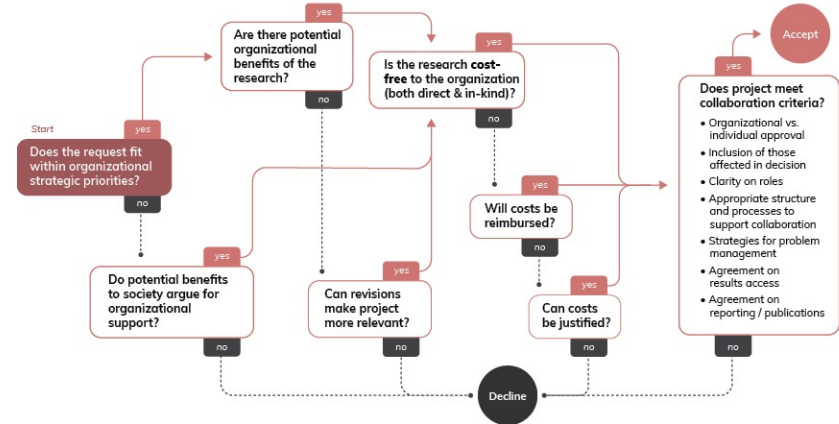
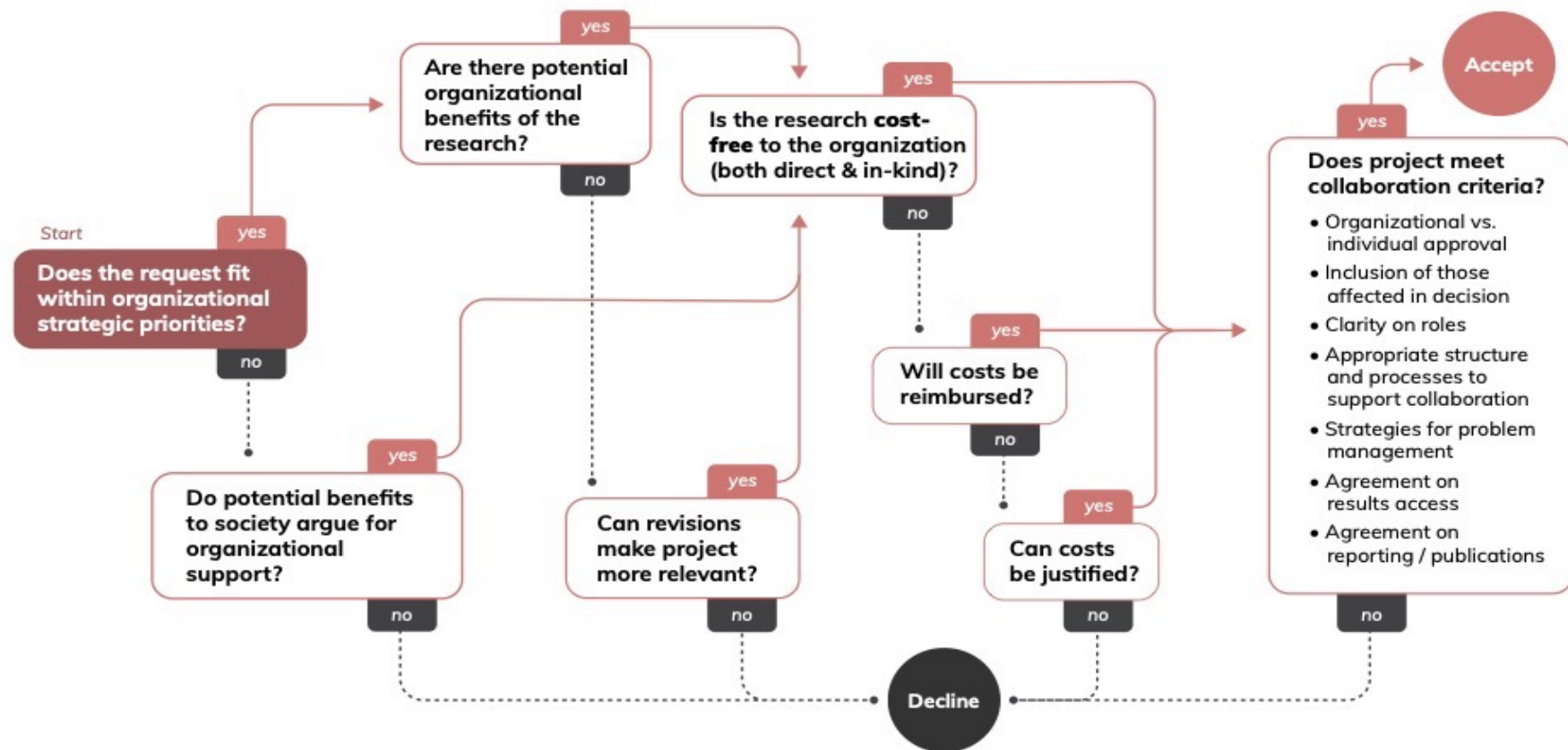Has your organization been asked to provide access to data, clients/patients, site or to "partner" on a research project?

- **Yes, regularly**

- **Occasionally**

- **Only once or twice**

- **Never**

How confident are you in your organization's processes for deciding about these requests?

- **Very confident, we have a clear and consistent process**

- **Somewhat confident**

- **Not confident at all**

Fig. 6: Decision tree to assist organizations in evaluating requests for research collaboration

Start

Does the request fit within organizational strategic priorities?
- yes
- no

Are there potential organizational benefits of the research?
- yes
- no

Do potential benefits to society argue for organizational support?
- yes
- no

Can revisions make project more relevant?
- yes
- no

Is the research **cost-free** to the organization (both direct & in-kind)?
- yes
- no

Will costs be reimbursed?
- yes
- no

Can costs be justified?
- yes
- no

Does project meet collaboration criteria?
- Organizational vs. individual approval
- Inclusion of those affected in decision
- Clarity on roles
- Appropriate structure and processes to support collaboration
- Strategies for problem management
- Agreement on results access
- Agreement on reporting / publications
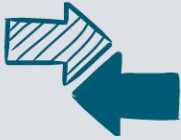
- yes → **Accept**
- no

Decline

Developing a research strategy

What's the best approach for our organization?

Two main ways to address organizational research needs

Having planned collaborative research activities (interface model)

Embedding research expertise within the organization

While "mixed" models may also be adopted, organizations need to appreciate the advantages and limitations of both

Creating a health organization – academic interface

- Many creative alternatives – located within academia or within health organizations
- Approach has both advantages and disadvantages
- *Potential pitfalls of individual relationships*
- A number of questions to consider in planning for this approach

Questions to consider

- What are objectives and scope of the 'interface' initiative?
- How will activities be funded?
- How responsive will initiatives be to organizational priorities?
- At what level of the organization is the initiative developed?
- How will organizational staff have input into decisions?
- How will differences and misunderstandings be handled?
- How will the organization address additional research-related needs?
  - (e.g. 'just in time' evidence reviews, evaluation)
- Is the organization interested in linkages with more than one academic centre?

Potential Pitfall	Characteristics associated with success
Collaborations limited to research questions for which there are current research funding opportunities rather than organizational priorities	Recognition that the collaboration will likely not address all organizational interests and needs Investment in internal resources to address broader research-related needs Investment of all partners into co-development of ongoing relationships that will enable proactive action
Research findings not timely	Investment in internal resources to address immediate needs Negotiating access to preliminary findings
Failure to negotiate the different agendas, expectations, and cultures of the academic and health services world	Initial in-depth orientation for all participants that includes not only orientation to research and research processes, but also to the organization's structure, decision-making processes and priorities Ensuring strong negotiation skills on leadership team Clearly identifying areas of expertise of each team member Clear processes for addressing emerging problems Academic commitment to recognizing and rewarding diverse forms of research, dissemination and measurement of impact[6]
Collaborations developed at a personal, individual (e.g. researcher and manager) level rather than institution-to-institution level	Negotiated organization-organization agreements Written organization-to-organization memorandums of understanding, and/or specific contracts Ensuring appropriate organizational policy Succession plan to address potential loss of organizational leads

Potential Pitfall	Characteristics associated with success
Failure to involve appropriate partners with interest, skills in partnership	Guidelines for partnership that include requirements and expectations of partners Consideration of identifying an organizational 'relationship broker' with skills and responsibility to develop partnerships[5] Proactive identification and recruitment of researchers with partnership experiences and approaches
Inadequate time and resources dedicated to initiative	Ensuring identified staff have protected time to participate Clear communication of organization meeting time preferences and availability, as well as preferred communication strategies (e.g. email, phone, in-person. meeting) Negotiation of compensation for participation where appropriate (e.g. time in proposal development)
Projects driven by researcher interest or funding availability rather than organizational need	Appropriate planning dedicated to clarifying goals of the collaboration and organizational expectations, including requirement of academic commitment to addressing organizational priorities Clear terms of reference Clear processes and approval criteria for decisions on joint activity
Failure to monitor and evaluate development of the interface and participant experience with it	Joint development of plan to monitor and assess participation, satisfaction and impact Regular check–ins at senior leadership levels

[5] 5 Bowen S, Botting I, Graham ID, Huebner L-A. Beyond "Two Cultures": Guidance for Establishing Effective Researcher/Health System Partnerships. Int J Heal Policy Manag. 2016. doi:10.15171/ijhpm.2016.71

[6] Canadian Academy of Health Sciences. Academic Recognition of Team Science: How to Optimize the Canadian Academic System. 2017. https://www.cahs-acss.ca/academic-recognition-of-team-science-how-to-optimize-the-canadian-academic-system/?%0Ahttps://www.cahs-acss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2017-06-22-Team-Science-Report-Eng-FINAL-Web.pdf%0Ahttps://www.cahs-acss.ca/wp-content/uploa.

What do we mean by collaboration? By partnership?

- From "managed participation" to partnership of equals

- Partnership: *meaningful* involvement in all phases; shared *decision-making*

- Many traditions (participatory research, engaged research, integrated KT, co-production……)

- "*Who is driving the train*" an important consideration

Who is driving the train?

Where is it going?

"Collaborations on paper— I've seen that a lot to be quite honest. Almost to the point where I say: 'I'm sorry, we can't provide a letter of support.' When you're asking for a letter of support and you're alluding to collaboration, what does that look like if you get funding? Because what will happen most times is the funding will come through and we'll never hear from them again."

So the academic person would kind of come in…. and, this is the story I was told….. was kind of terrifying people into having them do what they wanted. …there was a lot of worry and anxiety…

So (now) we say: 'Your researcher can come here and play in our sandbox. Here are our rules'. So it keeps everyone kind of honest.

Embedding research capacity within the organization

- Also a number of advantages and disadvantages
- Common critical challenges
    - Stability and sustainability of funding;
    - Appropriate and supported staffing;
    - Integrating the initiative into organizational decision-making and operations;
    - Relationships with academia and other research bodies.

Questions to Consider

- What organizational objectives is the action meant to address? Is an embedded initiative the most appropriate response?
- What other actions (e.g. external collaborations) are required to meet org needs?
- How will embedded unit be integrated into organization decision-making? Will the initiative survive a change in current leadership?
- How will the initiative be resourced? How sustainable is the source of funding?
- What kinds of staff are needed to meet the objectives of the initiative? What qualifications do they need to have?
- What will be the relationship of the new roles with existing data management, performance measurement, quality improvement, and decision-support functions?
- How will these internal staff relate to the larger research community?

The critical importance of *Implementation* and *Evaluation*

- A poor idea, or failure of implementation?
- Evaluation plan in place BEFORE initiative implemented
  - Begin with implementation evaluation
  - Consider 'developmental', utilization focused approaches

Some problems can be avoided – or corrected

Where to from here?

Download the full guide

Gain insights from current evidence and health system leaders on how to:

- Identify goals of your research relationships

- Evaluate and respond to research requests (decision tree)

- Build capacity and responsiveness

- Plan for implementation and evaluation

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