Tools for Evaluating Field Receptivity to a Sentinel Events Approach

By James M. Doyle

During my NIJ Fellowship, two bodies of research — diffusion of innovation research and research regarding the decision to bring a new service product to market — guided my investigation of the criminal justice community's receptivity to a sentinel events approach. My conclusion that a sentinel events approach could be met with stakeholder cooperation is based on the strong positive responses I received with respect to the application of these evidence-based criteria.

Diffusion of Innovation

The first set of criteria I mobilized derives from the extensive body of theoretical and empirical literature on the general question of the diffusion of innovations.[1] The lessons from this field steered my investigation toward assessing, to the degree possible, how attractive new "culture of safety" practices would be to the pool of potential "early adopters" regarding the use of sentinel event reviews.

Diffusion theory holds that five qualities determine an innovation's success, and that overall success depends on the innovation's potential for attracting early adopters who are motivated by these qualities. These criteria informed my encounters with criminal justice stakeholders and their responses were a significant factor when I weighed the prospects for NIJ's Sentinel Events Initiative (SEI).

Although these questions require further investigation, a clear and stable consensus emerged among the stakeholders that an SEI approach would satisfy these criteria:

- *Relative advantage.* To what degree is this innovation seen by particular groups of criminal justice stakeholders as being better than the idea it replaces?

- *Compatibility with existing values and practices.* How compatible is the proposed innovation with existing values, experiences and needs of potential practitioner-adopters?

- *Simplicity and ease of use.* How difficult do diverse criminal justice stakeholders find this innovation to understand and use? Simpler ideas are adopted more quickly.

- *Trialability.* Do stakeholders believe this innovation can be tested on a limited basis? An innovation that potential adopters can experiment with represents less uncertainty.

- *Observable results.* Do criminal justice stakeholders believe that it will be easy for adopters to see the results of an innovation?

New Services Development and Marketing

The second set of criteria I used to gauge the criminal justice community's receptivity to a sentinel events approach is derived from research in the field of services marketing. Services marketing is an emerging discipline within the larger field of business studies that focuses on marketing new services, as opposed to new products.[2] This body of research could offer guidance to agencies that are considering whether to invest in further exploration of a sentinel event review process.

Applying these criteria to public programs (e.g., a violence prevention services initiative, as described by Sandler et al., 2005)[2] requires weighing the innovation's value to two levels of customers: the ultimate clients (with regard to a sentinel event review process, this would be the public and the individual citizens in contact with the criminal system) and the stakeholder agencies that might adopt the innovation.

I asked criminal justice stakeholders to assess the possibility of employing a version of a structured new service development process, derived from business-oriented literature, that implicates a number of standard areas of inquiry.[2] At the product development stage, agencies and individual leaders at federal, state and local levels face several issues:

- *Organizational mission.* Would exploring, developing and testing a template for a sentinel event review process be seen as consistent with the agency's mission and/or with the missions of participant agencies?

- *Idea generation.* Is the idea aligned with the agency's mission and competence? Can stakeholders be involved at early stages of idea development?

- *Concept development.* Is there a recognizable need for this innovation? Is developing it seen as feasible?

- *Feasibility.* Do stakeholders believe there will be a demand for this service and/or that it can be made affordable?

- *Prototype development.* Do stakeholders see this innovation as one that can be tested on a small scale?

Notes

1. Rogers, E.M. (2003). *Diffusion of Innovations* (5th edition). New York, NY: Free Press.

2. Sandler, I., Ostrom, A., Bitner, M.J., Ayers, T., Wolchik S., and Smith-Daniels, V. (2005), "Developing Effective Prevention Services for the Real World: A Prevention Service Development Model," *American Journal of Community Psychology,* Vol. 35, Nos. 3/4, June 2005, p. 127.