A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis

The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving

Third Edition

Eugene Bardach

Richard and Rhoda Goldman School of Public Policy
University of California, Berkeley

CQPress
A Division of SAGE
Washington, D.C.
"SMART (BEST) PRACTICES" RESEARCH: UNDERSTANDING AND MAKING USE OF WHAT LOOK LIKE GOOD IDEAS FROM SOMEWHERE ELSE

It is only sensible to see what kinds of solutions have been tried in other jurisdictions, agencies, or locales. You want to look for those that appear to have worked pretty well, try to understand exactly how and why they may have worked, and evaluate their applicability to your own situation. In many circles this process is known as "best practices research." Simple and commonsensical as this process sounds, it presents many methodological and practical pitfalls. Part III helps you to avoid the pitfalls and offers tips on how get the most payoff from your search for best practices.

DEVELOP REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Semantic Tip First, don’t be misled by the word best in so-called best practices research. Rarely will you have any confidence that some helpful-looking practice is actually the best among all those that are addressed to the same problem or opportunity. The extensive and careful research needed to document a claim of "best" will almost never have been done. Usually, you will be looking for what, more modestly, might be called "good practices."

But even this claim may be too grand. Often you can’t even be sure that what appears to be a good practice is actually good in the sense that...

1. Readers interested in a more social scientific exposition of many of the points in Part III should consult Bardach 2004.
it is solving or ameliorating the problem to which it is nominally addressed. On closer inspection, it may turn out that a supposedly good practice is not solving the problem at all. Inadequate measurement, plus someone's rose-colored glasses, was simply producing the illusion of mitigating the problem. It may also turn out that, even if good effects have truly occurred, the allegedly good practice had little or nothing to do with producing them. Finally, innocently extrapolating from a setting where a good practice has indeed worked well to settings that differ in little-understood but important ways may lead to weak, perverse, or otherwise damaging results.

None of these problems is decisive, though. If it does nothing else, a foray into best practices research usually turns up interesting ideas, including ideas about what does not work as well as what does. Indeed, it may be altogether better to think of such research as “a search for (apparently) smart ideas embodied in practice.”

ANALYZE SMART PRACTICES

A “practice” is a tangible and visible behavior. When you can ask a program manager what her practice is in addressing some problem, she can answer with a description of what she does. Typically, though, a practice is also an expression of some underlying idea—an idea about how the actions entailed by the practice work to solve a problem or achieve a goal. Some such ideas are particularly clever, and I shall explain further what I mean by this. The practices that embody them I call “smart practices.”

Finding the Free Lunches

One way of being clever is getting something for nothing. Contrary to the dictum that there is no such thing as a free lunch, creative policymakers and policy implementers invest quite a lot of energy in looking for just such comestibles. Often, they are successful. To understand how this can be, consider the free lunch cornucopia produced by the natural sciences and engineering. The energy stored in the chemical bonds in a cup of gasoline can run a car for a few miles if only you know how to access that energy and channel it. Pulleys and levers supply mechanical advantage. Bacteria happily eat and destroy the organic crud in a city’s wastewater almost for free. All these materials, devices, and conditions amount to getting a lot of “something” for nothing or for relatively little. The source of all these boons is simply Mother Nature.

In the social world, the sources of something for nothing are usually less tangible and less directly gifts of Mother Nature, but they are no less real. The “invisible hand” of the market creates social value where once there was only individual pursuit of self-interest, and, metaphorically at least, it operates without charge. Alphabetical ordering permits people to find information in a fraction of the time it would have taken had there been no such ordering. Queuing at bus stops is easy to understand and usually fair, and it makes life better for everybody.

In the world of policy and management, there are no doubt fewer and less detectable free (or nearly-free) lunches than in the marketplace or in an information storage facility or at a bus stop. But they are there. All the “opportunities” described in Box I-1 (p. 8) have this latent potential to generate something of public value relatively cheaply. (On the nature of “public value,” see Moore 1996.) You might say that the difference between the (high) value created and the (low) cost, and risk, of producing it represents a free lunch.2

Opportunities don’t deliver up their latent value without some additional work, however. This work is done by practices that take advantage of their potentialities, and these practices typically cost something and are subject to various vulnerabilities as well. However, the smarter these practices are, the more value they can manage to extract at lower cost and risk.

The following list offers some examples of candidates for smart practice status—candidates, that is, because to my knowledge they have not all been subjected to the extensive empirical testing needed to confirm such status:

- A “high-expectations” welfare-to-work program. Implemented in the early 1990s, the Greater Avenues to Independence (GAIN) program I studied in Riverside County, California, was a prototype for the 1996 federal welfare reform act. Unlike most other welfare-to-work

---

2. Risks come in several varieties; see the section called “Describe Generic Vulnerabilities.”
programs, the Riverside program set high expectations about work for GAIN participants in two senses. In many different ways, it signaled to participants that program staff had confidence in (high expectations of) their ultimate success in getting a job and getting off welfare. This confidence was intended as an antidote to many participants’ low self-esteem, and consequent low effort to reattach themselves to the labor force. Staff also signaled—and expressed in program rules about early and diligent job search, as well as through a variety of formal and informal pressures—that “society expected” welfare participants to shape up and take responsibility for their own financial well-being. The Riverside GAIN program designed its recruitment, training, performance appraisal, and other administrative systems to support this high-expectations philosophy (Bardach 1997). In effect, the high-expectations model took advantage of the natural energy to solve their own problems that program managers assumed to be latent in the program participants.

**Reading One-to-One.** A tutoring program for children in Grades 1–3 who have fallen badly behind in learning to read English was created by George Farkas of the social sciences faculty of the University of Texas at Arlington; it was first tried out in Dallas and then spread to Houston and a number of other cities. The program involves systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, one-to-one tutoring by a well-trained tutor, and highly structured feedback and supervision. Like all phonics-based programs, it recognizes that English orthography does not map sounds in a systematic or logical way and that it is at some point necessary for learners to master the decoding and encoding rules actually in use. It takes advantage of the fact that children’s early failures in reading that come from neglect of phonemic awareness are reversible by regular tutoring. It also takes advantage of the emotional bonding that comes from the one-to-one tutoring relationship. The simplicity and systematization of the teaching materials, teaching methods, and administrative oversight system make the program easily replicable and keep the costs relatively low (Farkas 1998).

- **Sharing maintenance responsibilities for a neighborhood park between the local parks department and the residents of the neighborhood.** Nonprofit organizations often spring up to provide services of a nonstandard sort not provided by the public agency (e.g., same-sex schools, abortion clinics). An extension of this basic idea is a partnership in which the public sector supplies certain resources that are not only supplementary but also complementary. In many a setting, the city government provides the parkland and the neighbors provide some or all of the labor to make the land more serviceable in some way. This practice takes advantage of two interesting potentialities: the potential for gains from trade between two parties, and the use of what is in effect barter, in a situation where there are administrative and political barriers to organizing the transaction in cash.

- **The “expenditure control” budget.** Adopted first in the city of Fairfield, California, this practice was publicized by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (1992) in their influential book, *Reinventing Government.* As originally conceived and implemented, this budgeting strategy gave each department the same basic mission and the same budget as in the previous year (with an inflation adjustment) but abolished the line-item specification of expenditures, permitting the department to keep any savings and reinvest them in other mission-related activities. This approach took advantage of the superior technical and operational knowledge of program implementers relative to that of elected officials and bureaucrats in fiscal-control agencies.

- **Milestone payments to nonprofit service contractors.** In 1992 the Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services began paying nonprofit contractors for meeting the rehabilitation milestones, defined in performance terms, that mental health clients could achieve en route to higher levels of employability. The clients got to participate in assessing whether the milestones had been met.

---

3. This program was a 1997 finalist in the Ford Foundation/Kennedy School of Government (KSG) Innovations in American Government competition. My source for information about it was the Innovations program files.
while vendors got to help in defining generic milestones and other aspects of the program. The milestone system also permitted contractors to claim reimbursement from the state on a more accelerated schedule than they had previously been able to do, thereby taking advantage of the power of self-interest to motivate better performance from the nonprofits. It also provided greater transparency than more traditional fee-for-service arrangements, under which the funding agency did not know much about the quality of the service provided.

- A cooperative project between rehabilitation and recycling programs. Hennepin County, Minnesota, arranged for mentally retarded clients of the county vocational rehabilitation program to sort and recycle discarded auto batteries, an item of concern to the county’s environmental management agency. The two programs thus took advantage of production complementarities between physical and human “assets” that they could deploy.

**Semantic Tip** Note that I have made a point, in describing supposedly smart practices, of saying that each practice “takes advantage” of something. This is a linguistic device for ensuring that in analyzing how the practice works, we focus on those aspects of its workings that are central—that is, on the fact that the practice aims to exploit, or take advantage of, some latent opportunity for creating value on the cheap.

**Breaking Loose from Conventions and Assumptions**

Another way of being clever is not so much technical—finding those free lunches—as ideological and psychological. It involves disrespecting conventional boundaries. In the world of public policy and management, this practice sometimes involves challenging assumptions that are anchored in value commitments. For example, since the late 1980s we have begun to shake the assumption that just because some good or service is “good for the community” and ought to be financed through taxation, it ought also to be produced or delivered by government employees. Instead, we now contemplate contracting out to the nonprofit or even the profit-seeking sectors such traditionally “governmental” functions as primary education, correctional institution construction and management, and welfare-to-work programming. In this case, we are challenging the assumption that governmental provision necessarily embodies a social expression of the value of community. Taxpayer financing may do so, but governmental provision does not.

Another value-oriented smart practice may be to simply articulate the values that underlie a program and make it effective. Riverside’s high-expectations welfare-to-work model, for instance, was one of relatively few programs prior to the mid-1990s that decided it was proper to articulate the value premises that underlay its approach to case management.

**OBSERVE THE PRACTICE**

In free-lunch-type situations, we can say that the smart practice is “whatever takes advantage of—or exploits—the latent opportunity to create value on the cheap.” But let us try to say more about how to characterize this “whatever.”

**Characterizing the Features of a Smart Practice**

The basic mechanism in a smart practice is its means of directly accomplishing useful work in a cost-effective manner. A smart practice is made up of (1) the latent potential for creating value (from Box I-1, for instance), plus (2) the mechanism for extracting and focusing that potential. In the six examples described earlier, I indicated the basic mechanisms by saying what each of the practices “takes advantage of.” For instance, the shared maintenance for parks takes advantage of potential gains from trade and the opportunity to use barter as a substitute for cash payment.

---

4. This project was a Ford/KSG semifinalist. See Borins 1998, 200; also, I had personal communication with Hennepin County program managers.

5. Whether or not contracting-out is a smart practice, it is highly controversial, I might add.

6. With minor adjustments, the same analysis can also be applied to practices whose “smartness” derives from their departure from convention.
But there is more to a smart practice than this basic mechanism (Bardach 2004). Some characteristic secondary features of a smart practice are the following:

- **Implementing features**, which directly embody the basic mechanism. In the Oklahoma milestones case, for instance, they are the payment schedule, payment amounts, and payment conditions. In the Hennepin County recycling/rehabilitation program they are the stock of recyclable materials, the pool of mental retardation clients, and the interagency understandings that link them.

- **Supportive features**, which are primarily those resources used to bring the implementing features into being—for instance, a budget and an institutional structure. Other supportive features that have a less directly instrumental role but may nevertheless be important might include the culture of the organization or the broader political environment.

- **Optional features**, or those that just happen to be of interest to actors in the site where the practice is observed but may not necessarily be valued elsewhere. For instance, in the Oklahoma milestones case, the feature that allows vendors to participate in the design of the program seems to me optional—although nice!

### Distinguishing Functions and Features

**Semantic Tip** In adapting a seeming smart practice from a “source site” for application at a “target site,” you want to be rigorous in replicating the logic—the “how”—of the basic mechanism, while leaving maximum flexibility as to the specific means to carry it out. To do this, distinguish between the **functions** involved in getting the mechanism to work and the particular **features** that embody those functions. For instance, in the milestones program, the functions include setting the milestones and verifying the claims of achievement. These actions are part of the defining logic of the practice—they cannot be omitted without changing the very essence of the program. However, exactly what features are chosen to implement these functions or to support the implementation strategy is another matter. With regard to the high-expectations welfare-to-work program, two essential functions are creating a moral climate favoring responsibility and instilling self-confidence that such responsibility can be met. Exactly what design features should be chosen to implement and support these functions is a more open-ended question, though.

**Semantic Tip** Here is a linguistic hint to help you separate features and functions: Functions should be formulated as gerunds, verb-like nouns ending in “ing”—as in the actions defined above as setting, verifying, creating, and instilling—while the features that perform these functions can be indicated by pure nouns.

An exception to this principle of formulating functional language arises when you really need or want to specify a particular method for carrying out a function. In the milestones case, for instance, you might intentionally refer to a contract as a specific means of defining expectations among the parties and to documents as a means of attesting that the milestones have been met.

### Allowing for Variation and Complexity

Because smart practices are internally complex, context-sensitive, and capable of being used by different parties to pursue slightly different bundles of goals, how we talk about them should reflect these qualities.

**Characterization should be generic and flexible, not prescriptive and overly precise.** Consider the expenditure control budget described earlier. Does the practice there require giving **all** the savings back to the department, or would, say, 50 percent qualify? If the basic idea is to provide incentives to spend wisely, returning 50 percent may suffice. Probably the best characterization, therefore, would be “allowing the department to retain enough of the savings for its staff to feel motivated to create the savings in the first place.” It would then be up to whoever implements the expenditure control budget to determine what “enough” means in the local context.

I would also say that it **should** be left to local implementers to figure out the details of the generic practice that make sense in their own

---

7. Note that this is an interpretation asserted by the researcher-observer, not necessarily something that has actually been done in practice or endorsed by any practitioners.
context. Allowing for local adaptation of nonessential features not only serves common sense but also encourages greater buy-in by the locals to a practice that in some sense is being imported from elsewhere or, worse yet, imposed from outside.

Characterization of the basic mechanism of a smart practice is not necessarily simple; it can be complex. In my list of examples of candidate smart practices, I included only relatively simple practices, so as not to cause confusion. However, some smart practices are multifaceted, and thus not easy to summarize in a few sentences or even paragraphs. Michael Barzelay analyzed what he called the “postbureaucratic paradigm” for managing statewide overhead and control functions in Minnesota state government. He considered trying to reduce the many aspects of this postbureaucratic paradigm—which I would also call a smart practice, albeit a very large one—to a few “core ideas” such as service, customer focus, quality, incentives, creating value, and empowerment. However, he concluded, “the major concepts . . . are not organized hierarchically, with one master idea at the top,” but are instead arrayed as “an extended family of ideas” (Barzelay 1992, 115–117).

A related management reform paradigm, called by many the “new public management” (NPM), emerged in New Zealand in the mid-1980s as another such extended family of ideas and practices. Noting that it “is not reducible to a few sentences, let alone a slogan,” one observer (Borins 1998, 9) goes on to state its key ideas, as follows:

- Government should provide high-quality services that citizens value.
- The autonomy of public managers, particularly from central agency controls, should be increased.
- Organizations and individuals should be evaluated and rewarded on the basis of how well they meet demanding performance targets.
- Managers must be assured that the human and technological resources they need to perform well will be available to them.
- Public-sector managers must appreciate the value of competition and maintain an open-minded attitude about which services belong in the private, rather than the public, sector.

Specimens of a smart practice in the real world look rather different from one another and require careful interpretation. You should try to find multiple exemplars, or specimens, of a smart practice to get a sense of its robustness and efficacy when (1) it is being implemented under different supportive (or antagonistic) conditions, (2) it comes with different optional features attached, and (3) it employs supposedly equivalent but nevertheless somewhat different means to perform the required functions. Ideally, you would be able to find social scientific evaluation studies of practices that supply both data and theoretical interpretation regarding such matters. In most cases, however, such evaluations will not exist. Normally—or perhaps at best—you will find writings or speeches by practitioners describing successes in a few places, accompanied by only sketchy descriptions of what was done or the difficulties of implementation. You will need to think very hard and reason very carefully about how you will want to conceptualize (that is, define) the smart practice of interest and to assess the support requirements you think are most important. You need to do this even before you get to thinking about how the practice might work in the particular context(s) you have in mind (see the later discussion of this point under “But Will It Work Here?”).

DESCRIBE GENERIC VULNERABILITIES

It should be part of standard professional practice in describing smart practices to explain not only how and why they work but also how and why they fail, collapse, backfire, and generally make people sorry they ever tried them. That is, we should be told the nature of their generic vulnerabilities. A generic vulnerability is a potential weakness of the practice that is somehow connected with its basic causal structure. It may have to do with a high sensitivity to small errors in execution, or with the environment in which the practice is being implemented (e.g., an environment that imposes certain insupportable stresses).

Of course, all political and implementation environments are stressful to a certain degree, and we can reasonably include in the definition of a particular smart practice those features necessary to safeguard it against the more predictable and potentially damaging stresses. Without such
safeguards, an otherwise smart practice can become a very dumb practice. For instance, although privatizing certain municipal service functions is a smart practice when would-be private suppliers operate in a competitive market, it might become a very dumb practice under these circumstances: (1) if it were carried out in an environment monopolized by a single supplier; (2) if the bidding process were very corruptible, and corrupt interests were to discover this fact; (3) if inappropriate performance measures were stipulated in the contract; or (4) if the municipal contract management procedures were overly rigid or overly lax. To take another example, a high-expectations welfare-to-work program is vulnerable to the condition of the local labor market: if unemployment is high and jobs are scarce, high expectations may produce in participants more defeatism about themselves and more cynicism about the “responsibility” that society is urging on them. A government/neighborhood partnership for park maintenance is, in a generic sense, vulnerable to, among other things, temptations on the part of policymakers to slowly shift more and more of the burden onto the neighbors while reallocating budgetary funds to other departments.

Generic vulnerabilities are only the potential for trouble, it should be remembered. Whether the troubles actually materialize depends on the nature of the local environment in which the smart practice is implemented and on the success of various parties who are aware of the vulnerabilities in designing and implementing successful countermeasures. Contracting processes, for instance, can be designed to minimize corruption, albeit at some cost. And neighbors entering into a partnership with the city regarding parks maintenance can insist on putting the terms of the partnership in writing and holding a well-publicized press conference to announce them. Even if such a document had no legal standing, it might give neighborhood representatives some useful political leverage in later years.

Two particular types of vulnerability are especially worth attending to. One pertains to likely failures of general management capacity—such as a low general level of leadership talent or the lack of a “good government” ethos that would make it easier to implement this or any other practice successfully. The other pertains to weaknesses intrinsic to the particular practice itself—such as a service delivery program’s susceptibility to conflict over whether to give priority to this or that catchment area or needy subpopulation, or a safety-oriented regulatory program’s inability to determine whether to err on the side of injury-tolerant leniency or costly stringency.

**But Will It Work Here?**

Assuming that you have understood the essence of the generic smart practice very well, including its generic vulnerabilities, and have mapped the variety of supportive features that could increase its odds of success, in the end, you must still ask: “Assuming that this practice is indeed smart in some contexts, is ours a context in which it can work well enough to warrant trying it?” Answering this question intelligently entails looking both at the source contexts, where the practice appears to have worked well, and at your own target context, where it is being considered for adoption.

**Assessing the Target Context**

Within your target context, a careful assessment of the present situation is in order, of course, but a static answer based on this assessment is not enough. You need to think also about what might be done at reasonable cost or risk to improve the prospects of the smart practice in the target context, were it to be implemented there. These actions fall into the following two categories:

- **Safeguarding strategies.** Consider the generic vulnerabilities of the smart practice: are the most dangerous of them likely to cause unacceptable trouble in your context? For instance, if excessive rigidity in the contract management process is a generic vulnerability of partnering with a nonprofit agency, are your contract management institutions known to be unusually rigid? And if so, is there anything you can do to offset this problem? Might you, for instance, find someone in the contract management bureau who can serve as a special protector and expeditor? Or, if you cannot do that, can you find some way to structure the contract terms so that the contractor is held accountable for achieving general results rather than for following specific procedures?
• Enhancement strategies. Consider what I called earlier the “supportive features” that can help a practice to work better: What supportive features will be put into play? How well are they likely to perform? Can you do anything to improve them? For instance, can you attract top-notch personnel to manage this program or undertake this project? Can you obtain more stable funding than annual appropriations? Can you mobilize the press to take positive notice of what you are doing? Can you count on the support of key stakeholders and relevant political constituencies—or at least on weak action from opponents?

Evaluating the Source Contexts

If you have to search very hard for smart practices that might be usable in your own situation, the chances are that such practices are not very widespread. This means that the specimens you locate will come from jurisdictions, agencies, or locales where policymakers and administrators tend to look more favorably on novelty and innovation than is usually the case. Hence, their overall managerial capacity may be better than average—and perhaps better than the one in your own locale.

If the source contexts are largely pilot or demonstration programs, you need to be particularly cautious, because (1) pilot program implementers often bring more enthusiasm and talent to bear on their work than the average program implementers, and enthusiasm and talent count for something; (2) the political and financial conditions at the pilot sites are probably more favorable (or less unfavorable) than those at the average site; and (3) bureaucratic resistance to a pilot program is typically less intense than to a permanent change that threatens existing values, status, job security, or work routines.

How cautious should you be in extrapolating from successes observed in pilot or demonstration contexts? No systematic research exists to answer this question. However, a RAND Corporation analysis of a variety of juvenile crime prevention programs discounted the effectiveness levels attained in the pilot contexts by 15–40 percent when estimating a “scaling up penalty” that would apply when implementing the programs on a wide scale (Greenwood et al. 1995). Although the RAND analysts offered no explicit reasoning for choosing the penalty factors that they did, their choices do seem reasonable.

If you are analyzing the possibility of implementing a smart practice not just in some known local context but on a wide scale, you should be concerned about more than the fact that pilot program results may be much better than average. You should also be concerned about the existence of many below-average sites where the smart practice would be implemented—some of them perhaps quite a bit below average. In an era when it was much less common than it is today to think about the federal devolution of program and policy responsibilities to state governments, federal policymakers—particularly political liberals—often worried about the “Mississippi problem.” Mississippi was the rhetorical symbol of the poor, backward, and probably racist jurisdiction that would almost surely wreck or pervert any smart practice it was given responsibility for implementing.

BACK TO THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

Given the typical shortfall of good evidence relative to theory and speculation when it comes to assessing a smart practice, there is a danger of unwarranted optimism. Indeed, a common criticism of the best practices research tradition is that it becomes excessively enthusiastic about what appear to be good ideas before their worth is sufficiently tested.  

But how much testing is “sufficient,” anyway? The answer has to be framed partly in terms of the costs of displacing what might actually be a better practice—perhaps even the practices currently in use (described earlier as “letting present trends continue”). However, if you are reasonably confident that current practices are ineffective or harmful, the costs of wrongly abandoning them in favor of the new and untried may not be so high after all. Thus, although the new and untried should bear some burden of proof, it should not be an excessive one. The correct approach is to treat the risks and uncertainties involved in adopting some seemingly smart practice as comparable to the uncertainties associated with all the other alternatives under consideration.

8. Unfortunately, excessive enthusiasm for experiments that eventually fail gives even appropriate enthusiasm for experimentation a bad name.
Of course, the costs of change—negotiation, insecurity, hard feelings, and so on—must also be counted against bringing in a new and seemingly smart practice. But such costs must be counted against any change, not just change to accommodate smart practice. Moreover, if institutions and people are very stuck in their ways, there may be benefits to change as such, not merely costs.⁹

⁹. Alternatively, if institutions and people are forever being reformed and reinvented and remodeled—as occurs in many public school systems—there may be benefits to stability, consistency, and focus.