# Systems Reviews

## An Approach to Building Coherence, Increasing Efficiency, and Improving Workflow at State Education Agencies

Heather Mattson, Jennifer Zoffel, and Malachy McCormick

April 2023

**CC**NETWORK
Comprehensive Center Network

REGION 15
Arizona | Nevada
California | Utah

*Systems Reviews: An Approach to Building Coherence,*
*Increasing Efficiency, and Improving Workflow at State Education Agencies*

CCNETWORK
Comprehensive Center Network

REGION 15
Arizona | Nevada
California | Utah

# Contents

*Systems Reviews: An Approach to Building Coherence,*
*Increasing Efficiency, and Improving Workflow at State Education Agencies*

CCNETWORK
Comprehensive Center Network

REGION 15
Arizona | Nevada
California | Utah

– i –

*Systems Reviews: An Approach to Building Coherence,*
*Increasing Efficiency, and Improving Workflow at State Education Agencies*

CC NETWORK
Comprehensive Center Network

REGION 15
Arizona | Nevada
California | Utah

# Systems Change at State Education Agencies

The challenges state education agencies (SEAs) must address are exceedingly complex, requiring sophisticated levels of thinking and problem-solving as well as the ability to leverage disparate points of view in finding impactful solutions. These challenges are technical, requiring specific and known solutions to achieve desired results. But they are also adaptive, often requiring a paradigm shift to achieve desired results. Building leadership and staff capacity to solve adaptative challenges is essential for closing the gap between the current reality and the kind of system an SEA aspires to be. Building that capacity takes time and reflection (Heifetz et al., 2009).

To provide more coherent, integrated services to the field in the face of complex challenges, SEAs need to engage in systems change. They need to organize functional activities in a manner that improves coordination and eliminates redundancy, since coherence makes greater effectiveness and productivity more likely (Redding & Nafziger, 2013). Through effective and intensive technical assistance, SEAs can build the capacity to transform their systems from fragmented and misaligned to coherent, while reorienting their leadership from reactive to proactive.

The Region 15 Comprehensive Center (R15CC), one of 19 federally funded regional comprehensive centers, provides capacity-building services and technical assistance to SEAs. Serving Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, R15CC helps SEAs improve educational outcomes for all students, close opportunity and achievement gaps, and improve the quality of instruction. Since the start of services for the current R15CC cycle in October 2019, the number of requests to help SEAs analyze their internal functionality has increased significantly. In the course of its work with SEA divisions across the region, R15CC created an iterative **Systems Review** approach that incorporates principles of organization development, improvement science, systems and design thinking, and overall continuous improvement. By strategically examining an organization from a systems perspective, the Systems Review process assists SEAs in considering new and more effective ways to build coherence, increase efficiency, and improve workflow—all in the service of effectively supporting local education agencies (LEAs) in implementing state priorities.

# Systems Review Foundation

Each Systems Review is rooted in the strengths, challenges, gaps, requirements, and context of the division or department seeking support. Because no two systems are exactly alike, each Systems Review has its own individual scope, components, and timing. But over the course of this work, R15CC honed an overall approach that applies commonly to all. Each Systems Review follows three main phases: discovery, change effort development, and implementation. The following section describes these phases in greater detail.

Stretched across those three phases, the Systems Review follows a cyclical process comprised of five elements: identify the issue; analyze the current system; identify and prioritize change efforts; implement key change efforts; and assess and deliberate on effectiveness. While the three phases are progressive and describe the major shifts in work as R15CC engages an SEA, the five components repeat throughout the project as new data sheds light on issues and change ideas. Some of the elements in the cycle bridge across more than one phase. Essential to this process are feedback and reflection points embedded throughout. The Systems Review Approach, with the interaction between the phases and elements, is detailed in Figure 1.

## Figure 1. Systems Review Approach
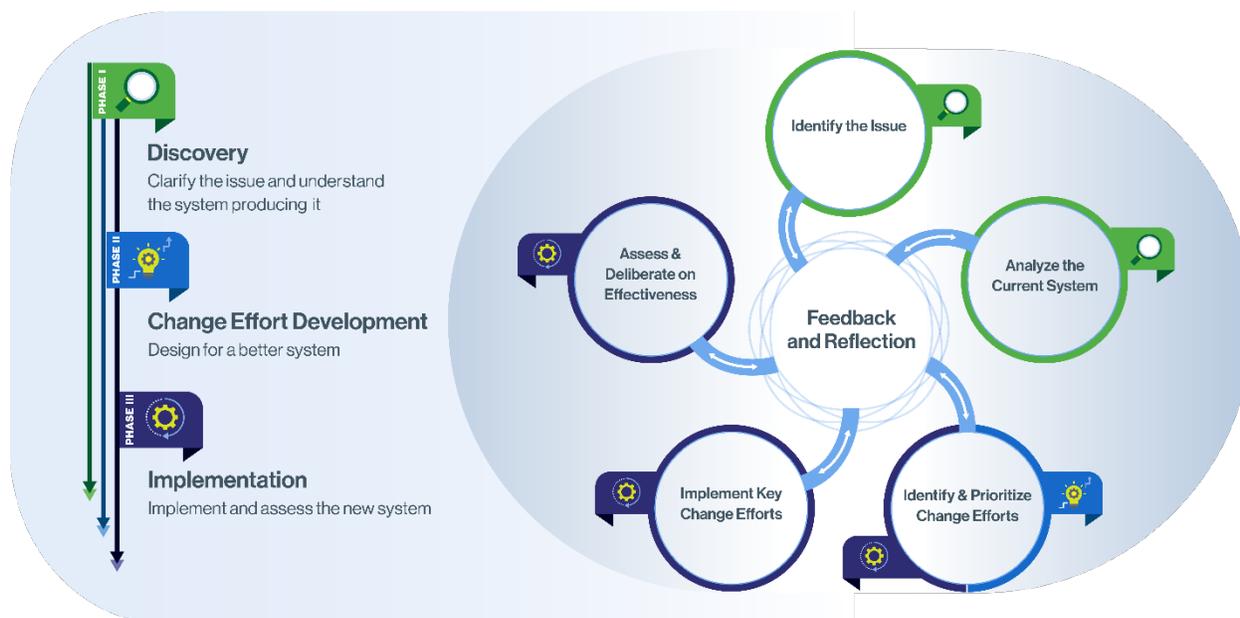
## Foundational Principles

Using this process, the Systems Review strategically examines the functionality and alignment of an SEA division's staff and programs in relation to its purpose. The review is built around the following foundational principles to ensure that it

- is iterative, reflective, analytical, data driven, and action-oriented;
- taps into the clients' observations and experiences;
- focuses on development, not performance; and
- supports a growth mindset, using a continuous improvement approach.

## Systems Review Team

The Systems Review process is extensive and collaborative. R15CC meets with the division or department director every 2 weeks and conducts collaborative work sessions with the Systems Review Team (SRT) approximately every 3 weeks over the course of 6–12 months. R15CC devotes time up front with SEA leadership to determine the issue this review will address. Each step of the process is guided by data that is gathered, analyzed, and discussed in the previous step.

Building system understanding is difficult without an improvement team that is representative of the system it is trying to improve (Nayfack et al., 2015). The R15CC Systems Review process is thus centered around a Systems Review Team, whose composition varies depending on context. Often, SRTs consist of the division director and senior managers and include built-in periodic feedback loops with the broader staff. Other times, staff and managers are included to ensure more representative input and inform the review process with broad perspectives and expertise from across the division or department.

## Systems Review Working Agreements

Looking inward can be challenging for any team, and there can be hesitancy to engage in a Systems Review process. Staff might think their team is being singled out, even though they are working their hardest. As a result, R15CC spends significant time at the beginning of the process, and as a touchpoint throughout, emphasizing to SEA teams that the Systems Review is about analyzing the complete system and the results the system is producing to help determine how it can be more efficient and coherent—with the goal of providing the most effective services possible to the field. The emphasis on the system, rather than anyone within it, contributes to a climate of safety, enabling teams to engage in honest and sometimes difficult conversations that build towards shared goals and improved results.

*Systems Reviews: An Approach to Building Coherence,
Increasing Efficiency, and Improving Workflow at State Education Agencies*

CCNETWORK
Comprehensive Center Network

REGION 15
Arizona | Nevada
California | Utah

To help teams stay grounded in this inquiry-based, systems approach, R15CC developed Systems Review Working Agreements, which guide all Systems Review projects. Drawing from many sources, these agreements—listed below—delineate how teams commit to working together on improving the system. The italicized statements are verbally added by R15CC facilitators when working with groups.

## Systems Review Working Agreements

- Stay focused on the system. (*This work is not about any individuals but rather about how the entire systems functions*.)

- Prioritize equity of voice: all teach, all learn. (*People in different parts of the system bring different perspectives and expertise. We want to bring that out in our work sessions.*)

- Keep an open mind with an inquiry focus and give activities a genuine try. (*We need to be open to the results of our inquiry and exploration. We go where the data leads us*.)

- Experience discomfort and treat struggles as learning opportunities. (*Ideally, this work will push us into a "stretch" zone of learning and help us develop ideas to improve the system*.)

- Be present and participate (with a right to "process"). (*When presented with new ideas, individuals will need to process that information and thinking in order to build on the work. This looks different, depending on individual styles, and we want to respect and honor that*.)

- Acknowledge impact and consider intent. (*When offering contributions, we need to be mindful of the impact, intended or unintended, that we have on our colleagues. When listening to contributions from others, we also want to consider their intent*.)

# Systems Review Phases

Each Systems Review follows three main phases: discovery, change effort development, and implementation. The five elements of the process that stretch across the three phases: identify the issue; analyze the current system; identify and prioritize change efforts; implement key change efforts; and assess and deliberate on effectiveness. Each step of the process is guided by data that is gathered, analyzed, and discussed in the previous step.

# Discovery Phase: Clarify the Issue and Understand the System Producing It

During the Discovery Phase, SRTs engage in a series of activities, facilitated by R15CC, to examine a shared problem in their system and determine potential root causes. Teams analyze the system to determine responsibilities, purpose, workload distribution, opportunities for collaboration, workplace climate, and management. Doing so helps build a shared understanding of existing processes and uncovers inconsistencies or challenge points that prohibit efficiency and coherence. R15CC works in close partnership with the client to collect and interpret data and determine appropriate tools and techniques for discovering and mapping key aspects of the system's current reality. This inventory of current reality allows the organization to identify and value its previous work and transition into new possibilities (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

The Discovery Phase can be time consuming and participants are often impatient to get to solutions. Acknowledging this, the process intentionally builds on small wins along the way. But R15CC stresses that the work at hand is to analyze a set of interrelated processes that can be broken down, analyzed, and improved (Biag & Sherer, 2021). Understanding the historical context and timing for change, factors that support or hinder change, and the ability to truly see the current system are all essential.

Additionally, this phase can often start to feel very focused on what is lacking. Since a Systems Review process is inherently an improvement process, much of the work is focused on clearly identifying problems and corresponding causes. While it is important to spotlight barriers, it is also essential to keep bringing strengths to the forefront during this phase and throughout the process. The system's strengths are both an important foundation for the change process and essential for keeping staff engaged throughout the process.

Again, since the Systems Review is an iterative and contextual process, specific activities and tools used during each phase vary by project, but many are consistently employed across all SEAs. While not an exhaustive list, the following tools and processes can all be used during the Discovery Phase to help participants understand the factors that support or hinder efficiency and coherence:

## Surveys

Surveys ensure initial, broad representation from as many staff as possible. R15CC develops a survey based on discussions with the division or department director, and sometimes SEA executive leaders, about the potential strengths and challenges within the current system. Surveys can be particularly helpful with a very large division or one with a new director that does not have a thorough understanding of the system factors that support or hinder efficiency and coherence. A survey might address broad topics such as collaboration, communication, workplace climate, and accountability.

## Listening Sessions

Like focus groups, listening sessions are a form of group interview that capitalize on communication between participants to generate data. Listening sessions go beyond the data collection function of a traditional focus group to allow participants to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one-on-one interview. Listening sessions also enable broader staff participation than individual interviews. Shared exploration within the listening session group supports participants' buy-in to the Systems Review and reinforces the client's full ownership of the problem and the solutions. Some Systems Review listening sessions focus on gathering input from the SRT and other key staff. In other cases, listening sessions are open to any staff, to build greater engagement in the process. Individual interviews with key staff can also be used to follow up on survey or listening session data.

## Project Inventories

In a project inventory, each division office lists their significant projects in a chart, describing the work and processes for completing it. Staff also describe work they wish they could do, existing cross-office collaborations, and work that could benefit from new collaborations. Each office also shares ideas to address any challenges they noted. Project inventories support the identification of

- responsibilities and distribution of workload within and across offices,
- opportunities for cross-division collaboration, and
- barriers to productivity.

For any and all of these data collection techniques, R15CC codes and tallies responses and identifies key themes, including structure, purpose, knowledge transfer, interdependence, relationships, workflow, collaboration, or additional themes derived using other organizational diagnosis models—the Six Box Model (Weisbord, 1976) or Six Conditions for Systems Change (Kania et al., 2018). These themes are then categorized as strengths, challenges and opportunities, and emergent cross-office topics. Compiled this way, the data provides insight into the system, including its history, issues contributing to longstanding challenges, bright spots of success, and potential ideas for change.

Along the way, R15CC shares data from the discovery activities with the SRT in work sessions where staff are asked to reflect upon, validate or refine, and prioritize themes. These sessions help the team further define and hone an overarching shared problem statement, which becomes the basis of the root cause analysis. As with much of this work, the root cause analysis, facilitated by R15CC, is iterative and continually refined as more data is shared and analyzed.

*Systems Reviews: An Approach to Building Coherence,*
*Increasing Efficiency, and Improving Workflow at State Education Agencies*

CCNETWORK
Comprehensive Center Network

REGION 15
Arizona | Nevada
California | Utah

# Change Effort Development Phase: Design for a Better System

This phase focuses on surfacing potential change efforts for addressing the root causes of the identified problem. Using a variety of tools and processes, R15CC supports team members to develop change efforts (e.g., new work processes that may be added; existing processes that may be changed; new tools that may need to be designed and tested; new norms that may be required to sustain productive change). As in the Discovery Phase, the activities in the Change Effort Development Phase are iterative and build upon one another, based on how the team decides to move. Some examples of tools and processes used in this phase follow.

## Process Map/Block Diagram

A common tool used in improvement efforts is a high-level process map or block diagram. A process map is a graphical representation of the steps needed to produce a particular outcome. Because processes are foundational to organizational systems, R15CC often facilitates the development of a high-level process map during a Systems Review to build a shared understanding of the key steps in producing a systemwide deliverable. Once concensus is reached on the process steps, this exercise also uncovers inconsistencies or ambiguity within an existing process by identifying challenge points (e.g., Where are staff getting stuck? What feels unclear?). In addition, it elicits change ideas for improvement (e.g., What ideas do you already have for improving the process? How might we add clarity and efficiency to the process?).

## Impact Effort Matrix

This visual decision-making tool help teams prioritize change ideas based on the balance between likely effort and anticipated impact. The impact effort matrix is plotted on two axes: the level of effort required to accomplish the change and the level of potential impact its completion would have. The matrix has four quadrants: quick wins (maximum impact, minimal effort); major projects (maximum impact, maximum effort); fill-ins (minimal impact, minimal effort); and time-wasters (minimum impact, maximum effort).

## Core Competencies Identification

This analysis focuses the team on the work they are responsible for and the competencies or skill sets needed to carry out that work. This team focus decenters how a particular individual may complete the task, making it easier to brainstorm possibilities for innovation. It also helps reveal hidden gaps or valuable leverage points. This intervention is often a next step in reviewing data from the project inventory, where R15CC looks across the inventories and names the thematic skill sets required. For example, if a division lists tasks such as developing content for the public website, drafting management bulletins, and preparing presentations to the State Board of Education, then the competency identified might be "Strategic Communications." The client then reviews the themes in light of the division's needs and

develops change efforts that might distribute, concentrate, leverage, or build that competency across the division's work.

## Organizational Structure Revision

When seeking to increase efficiency, coherence, or alignment, divisions often look to their organizational structure for possible change ideas. The R15CC approach to revising an organizational structure builds from the purpose statement (often developed within the Systems Review process) along with data collected by way of the project inventory. Using a strong understanding of the work to be accomplished as the starting point, teams envision multiple possible structures to accomplish that work. R15CC then facilitates conversations about the pros and cons of the various options created by the groups. After about three iterations, the team arrives at a final format. In addition to designing the relative orientation of the structure, teams also determine office names, purpose statements, and key responsibilities. Some teams require a full redesign, while others change only a portion of their overall structure. Throughout this process, R15CC guides the team back to the Discovery Phase data to question whether and how the new structure addresses the challenges and opportunities previously identified. Depending on the size of the team and the magnitude of the restructuring, R15CC may also support the team in communications efforts with and feedback collection from their full staff.

## Implementation Phase: Initiate and Assess the New System

During the Implementation Phase of the Systems Review, R15CC supports leaders to build on the reflection, analysis, and planning completed in the first two phases and pivot to make the change effort a reality. Not surprisingly, transitioning to implementation of a new system is a process with its own series of predictable phases, each of which takes time and effort to nurture and sustain (Fixsen et al., 2009). Change efforts can stumble due to a lack of implementation planning that delineates clear progress milestones. Efforts may also focus too much on the objective rather than on the steps and process involved or may fail to monitor progress and adjust accordingly (Gill, 2010). Feedback mechanisms can help avert these problems. Mechanisms should be planned and structured to allow constant feedback to flow into the system as new ideas, implementation realities, and emergence comments (Bain et al., 2011). Measuring impact in this way moves the work toward sustainability (Hale et al., 2017).

Transitions can also be difficult because they begin with an ending, which can create strong staff reactions and unsettling ambiguity before a new beginning takes shape (Bridges & Bridges, 2019). During the Implementation Phase, R15CC helps leaders navigate these issues by partnering to shape and share a clear transition plan, develop strategic communications, actively involve their full staff, acknowledge and honor feelings of uncertainty, help staff understand and clarify their role, and support increased collaboration and coherence. During

this transition period, R15CC shares and discusses key considerations for leadership teams. Some examples of tools and supports used during the Implementation Phase follow.

### Staff Engagement and Support

The primary focus of R15CC's intervention efforts are at the manager level and above, and an essential part of that work is supporting managers and directors to engage staff, especially during the Implementation Phase. That support includes helping leaders connect authentically with staff on topics relevant to both the change effort and the staff's work area. R15CC co-designs all-staff meetings, including objectives, group discussions, engagements, and meeting content, and guides leaders as they practice interacting with staff in new ways. Similarly, R15CC provides opportunities for leaders to experiment with new modes of communicating and working together and support staff engagement by curating and sharing relevant content materials in areas such as team dynamics, facilitation, and goal setting.

### Communication and Action Plans

Communication and action are key elements of implementation. R15CC helps teams organize their efforts by using basic templates that capture information such as the intended audience, key timelines, necessary steps, roles and responsibilities, and strategic messages. Completing a communication or action plan template provides a team the opportunity to identify assumptions, gaps, and misunderstandings related to the implementation process before taking action. It also helps a team prioritize their efforts and share ownership over decision-making and actions.

### Thought Partnership for Directors and Managers

When creating and leading a change effort, leaders need support to examine, shift, and communicate about differences in the organization's structure, purpose, procedures and routines, symbolic rituals, and formal messages. During the Implementation Phase, R15CC engages in regular one-on-one and group meetings with division leaders, acting as a thought partner, guide, and critical friend with whom to talk through unanticipated challenges, barriers, and resistance that occur throughout the change process. R15CC draws upon previously led experiences, provides connections to research on change efforts, and listens actively to the leader regarding challenges faced. By encouraging a balance of reflection and action, R15CC helps directors and managers develop their capacity to manage change.

### Implementation Working Agreements

During the Implementation Phase, it is essential to establish or bolster a strong foundation of structures and processes that effectively support collaboration, communication, and coherence. R15CC works with leaders and then the entire staff to establish divisionwide

working agreements that carry forward a systemwide commitment to continuously improve, which is essential to sustain during the Implementation Phase. Some broadly applicable elements of working agreements follow.

- *Strong culture of collaboration.* Managers create deliberate opportunities and structures that encourage staff to work collaboratively with colleagues within and across units.

- *Robust, open communication.* Staff communicate with one another often and clearly to reduce confusion and assumptions. Individuals acknowledge when their words may have had an unintended negative impact on colleagues. When listening to others, they consider the speakers' intent.

- *Trusting and effective teams.* Staff and managers intentionally demonstrate reliability, honesty, and competence, thus fostering trust and empowering team members to communicate openly and innovately and to take action.

## Assessing Implementation

R15CC works with leaders and staff to define the working agreements and collaboratively identify what the agreements look like in action for a particular division or department. The R15CC process monitors implementation at several levels. A self-assessment rubric based on the focus agreements is used during regular check-ins with the division director as well as at managers' meetings, one-on-ones with managers, and monthly division meetings. This process allows individuals and the division as a whole to assess and understand the status of their progress and to inform strategies for transforming their processes and practices.

# Capacity-Building Outcomes

Through the Systems Review process, R15CC supports SEA teams to take a systems approach to build coherence, increase efficiency, and improve workflow. Ultimately, the goal of a Systems Review is to build the capacity of a division's or department's leaders and their teams to establish a culture that supports continuous inquiry, review, and improvement. Teams that participate in this process increase their ability to develop a shared purpose, provide direction, make decisions, and be adaptive and resilient as they move through policy and leadership changes.

*Systems Reviews: An Approach to Building Coherence,*
*Increasing Efficiency, and Improving Workflow at State Education Agencies*

CCNETWORK
Comprehensive Center Network

REGION 15
Arizona    Nevada
California  Utah

By working together with R15CC on a Systems Review, SEA divisions can more clearly see and articulate their purpose, structure, interdependencies, and operating processes and procedures as well as identify gaps and opportunities within current work. Division teams can then mount meaningful change efforts and implement a plan focused on creating a system with increased internal and external functionality. The teams develop structures and processes to support clear communication and a shared understanding of their purpose and goals. They delineate roles and responsibilities in functional areas. These actions foster an adaptive and resilient culture and increase leaders' and teams' capacity to proactively manage change while anticipating and planning for potential resistance—key conditions for overcoming inevitable barriers and effecting successful systems change (Fullan et al., 2005).

# References

Bain, A., Walker, A., & Chan, A. (2011). Self-organization and capacity building: Sustaining the change. *Journal of Educational Administration, 49*(6). https://www.emarldinsight.com/0957-8234.htm

Biag, M., & Sherer, D. (2021). Getting better at getting better: Improvement dispositions in education. *Teachers College Record*, *123*(4), 1–42. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/016146812112300402

Bridges, W., & Bridges, S. (2019). *Managing transitions: Making the most of change* (2nd Ed.). Da Capo Lifelong Books.

Cooperrider, D. & Whitney, D. (2005). A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry. *The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems*, *87*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237404587_A_Positive_Revolution_in_Change_Appreciative_Inquiry

Fixsen, D., Blase, K., Horner, R., & Sugai, G. (2009). Scaling-up evidence-based practices in education. FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/scaling-evidence-based-practices-education

Fullan, M., Cuttress, C., & Kilcher, A. (2005). 8 forces for leaders of change: Presence of the core concepts does not guarantee success, but their absence ensures failure. *National Staff Development Council*, *26*(4). https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ752251

Gill, R. (2010). Change management—or change leadership? *Journal of Change Management, 3*(4). https://doi.org/10.1080/714023845

Hale, S., Dunn L., Filby, N., Rice, J., & Van Houten, L. (2017). *Evidence-based improvement: A guide for states to strengthen their frameworks and supports aligned to the evidence requirements of ESSA*. WestEd. https://www.wested.org/resources/evidence-based-improvement-essa-guide-for-states/

Heifetz, R. A., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Harvard Business Press.

Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The Water of Systems Change. FSG.
http://efc.issuelab.org/resources/30855/30855.pdf

Nayfack, M., Park, V., Hough, H., & Willis, L. (2015). Building systems knowledge for continuous improvement: Early lessons from the CORE districts. *Policy Analysis for California Education*. PACE. https://edpolicyinca.org/

Redding, S., & Nafziger, D. (2013). Functional coherence in the state education agency: A structure for performance management. *Solutions: Building State Capacity and Productivity Center at Edvance Research, 4.*
https://www.adi.org/downloads/Solutions_Issue_4_Functional_Coherence_in_SEA.pdf

Weisbord, M. R. (1976). Organizational diagnosis: Six places to look for trouble with or without a theory. *Group Organization Management*, *1*, 430–447.