EMT Associates, Inc.

Approach to Conducting Technical Assistance and Training Projects

Developing and managing a technical assistance and training project requires a distinct set of skills, resources and management procedures. EMT's approach to this endeavor is based on our 30-year history of successfully managing technical assistance (TA) and training efforts in local, state and federal settings, and in diverse organizational communities. Based on our experience, and on our commitment to delivering TA and training that makes a difference in actual performance, we have developed a cohesive set of procedures and techniques to meet the needs of our clients. Our approach recognizes that effective TA and training must be responsive to the particular audience being served, must incorporate current knowledge and evidence-based practice, and must be delivered in a flexible manner that adapts to resource constraints.

EMT's track record in conducting TA and training projects is extensive, having managed more than 30 statewide and national TA projects over the past 30 years. Across these projects, EMT has provided in excess of 5,000 TA trainings, workshops or individual consultations.

This paper will describe EMT's approach to conducting TA and training projects by discussing:

- Delivery of TA and training that meets client needs
- Conducting literature reviews and needs assessment in the subject field
- Responding to individual program-level requests for assistance
- Skills and expertise needed to conduct TA and training projects
- Project management systems and procedures

Delivery of TA and Training That Meets Client Needs

TA and training must be responsive to the particular needs of the client. Accordingly, we plan and implement the design and delivery of TA and training services in two major phases.

- The first phase is to develop an understanding of the **service context**, including a) understanding the issues that generated the need for TA and training, b) discovering the range, quality and relevance of resources (e.g., experts, evidence-based practices) to meet the need, and c) identifying the characteristics of the intended recipients (e.g., organizations, individuals) that impact motivation and capacity to access and use the TA and training services.
- The second phase of TA service provision is ensuring the capability to design and manage the optimal mix of TA and training **delivery strategies**, and to ensure the highest standards of training information content. Our procedures are designed to ensure an

optimal balance of scientific and technical quality, understandability to target consumers, and relevance and utility to the organizational and individual needs being addressed.

We recognize the need to work in **close collaboration** with the requesting agency/organization, and often with grantees of a funded initiative. Effective TA and training must be grounded in the local circumstances generating the need, and must consider challenges associated with application of these services in the recipient's working environment. Specific objectives for TA and training are defined by the client and commonly include enhanced service delivery; workforce development;, and the acquisition of knowledge, skills and technology at the program level that result in operational improvements.

We know that to be truly successful the TA and training provider must rely upon **evidence-based practice** in disseminating information and making recommendations to recipients. When working in a rapidly developing field with fluid and changing conditions, TA and training must be closely tied to current knowledge which in turn shapes best practices in the field. This connection, often referred to as "research to practice," is key in properly addressing every task in a TA and training project. Exhibit 1 conveys our understanding of how the principle of research to practice can be applied in a TA and training setting.

Exhibit 1: Application of a Research to Practice Model in a TA/Training Setting
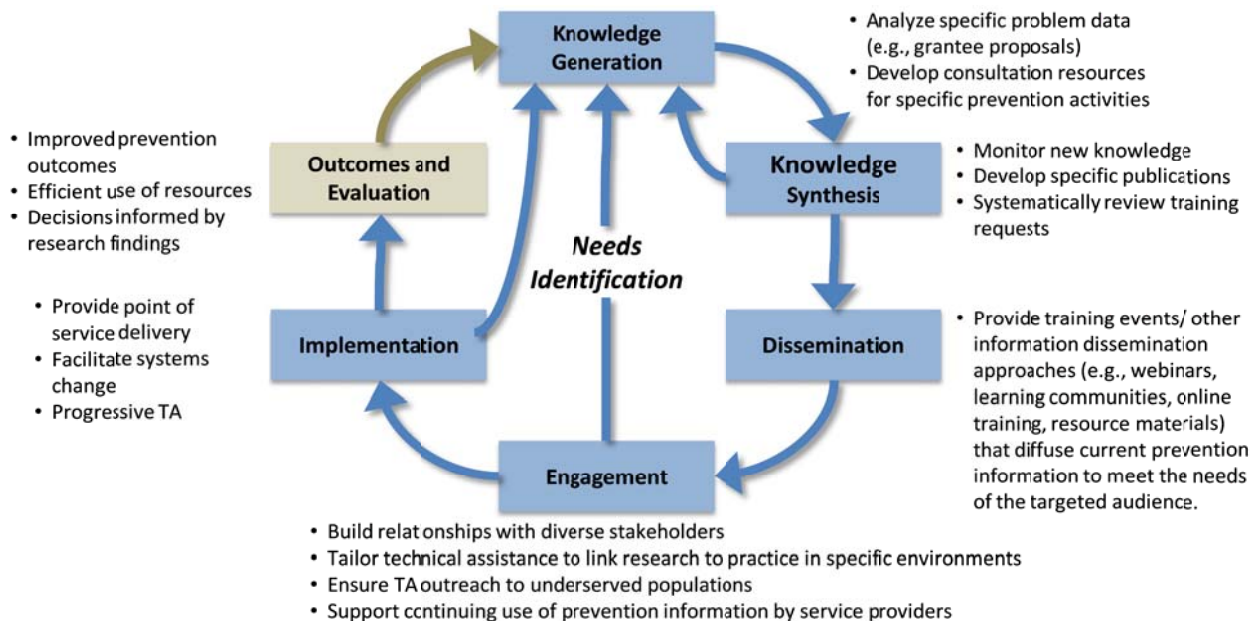
Finally, EMT recognizes the need to utilize a **broad range of TA and training formats and modes of delivery**. Our approach is to be aggressive in providing a variety of training and technical assistance delivery mechanisms that meet the diverse needs of audiences. Excellence in TA and training service delivery is not achieved through a cookie-cutter approach; rather, it requires creativity, awareness, and sensitivity to the needs of the situation and the request. The array of tasks that are typically provided in national and statewide TA and training projects includes:

- Administering large-scale training conferences that bring together project sponsors and program-level staff

- Administering program or agency-level training sessions on topics of interest

- Conducting webinars that make training sessions available to participants without incurring travel expenses

- Developing and deploying online training programs offering self-paced interactive training modules

- Developing and disseminating informational publications such as newsletters, case studies with "lessons learned" content, research briefing papers, bulletins and technical reports

- Responding to individual program-level requests for technical assistance to address specific issues

- Developing and maintaining a project website that promotes training opportunities, provides access to informational resources, serves as a portal to self-paced online training courses, and encourages the TA and training client community to submit individual requests for assistance

In consultation with the TA and training project sponsoring agency, EMT develops a service delivery plan that defines a mix of strategies to be employed and associates resource requirements with each strategy consistent with client expectations.

Conducting Literature Reviews and Needs Assessments in the TA and Training Field

In the early stages of a TA and training project, EMT has found that it is very useful to build a foundation for service delivery by conducting a literature review and needs assessment in the subject field of interest. While EMT will have a certain level of expertise already in the subject field (e.g. such as behavioral health or school emergency preparedness) it is nevertheless important for us to be up to date on the latest research, best practices, and current issues associated with the field.

- A **literature review** serves multiple purposes: it allows us to canvass existing resources and determine where the field currently lies on key topics and considerations; it allows us

to recognize gaps in the literature to potentially fill with TA and training resources once the project commences; it allows us to identify leading experts in the field for potential inclusion in our subject matter expert database (see below), and it familiarizes us with existing channels of information dissemination in the field so we are aware of potential opportunities for collaboration, areas for improvement, and how best to communicate with the target audience.

- In conjunction with the literature review, EMT conducts a **needs assessment of the target population** to better understand potential needs, areas of informational and skill gaps, cultural nuances, technological capacities, preferred methods of communication, common issues and barriers, and other relevant characteristics. This is accomplished through several methods. If it is a grant-based initiative, it will include a review of the grantee's proposals. We may also conduct key informant interviews (i.e. interviews with representatives of the population), online surveys, or other outreach data collection efforts. Collectively, this information helps EMT better understand and serve the target population.

Responding to Individual Program-Level Requests for Assistance

One of the most challenging components of any TA and training project is to successfully respond to individual requests for assistance from program-level staff (e.g. individual grantees). A given individual request requires careful consideration as to the best way to respond, often resulting in a combination of response elements. Exhibit 1 shows a relatively complete set of possible response elements, many of which draw upon the larger framework of TA and training strategies being implemented for the project. The program-level client may be directed to resources that are available on the project website or may be encouraged to participate in selected upcoming training sessions. In some cases, sending a subject matter expert (SME) to the program site is called for or specialized on-site training is needed.
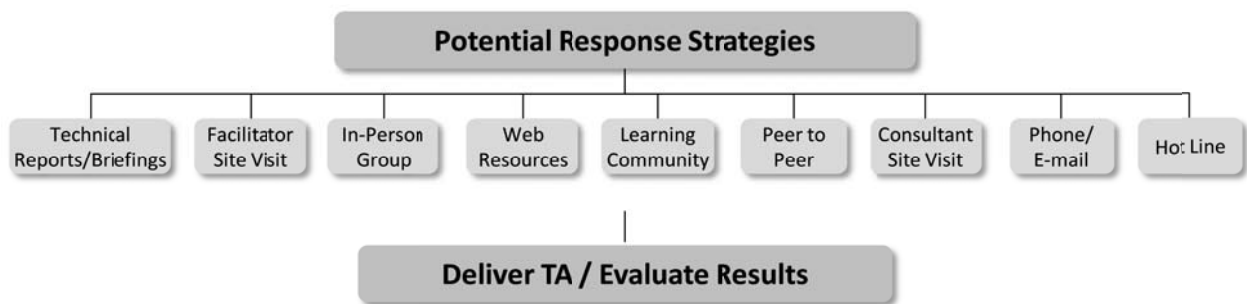
With every individual program-level request, EMT assigns a "case manager" to oversee and coordinate the response. In every instance, the case management function includes an initial written response offering resources and defining an overall response plan and follow-up contact to make sure that the requestor's needs have been met.

Skills and Expertise Required in Managing TA and Training Projects

Over the past many years, EMT has demonstrated that it has the skills and expertise needed to successfully manage large-scale TA and training projects. Following is a brief discussion of the most important of these skill sets and areas of expertise.

Expertise in Developing, Coordinating, and Implementing Large-Scale Training Events and Multiple Small-Scale Events

Many of the training contracts managed by EMT over the past 30 years have required the planning and implementation of major training events, some involving up to 3,000 participants. For these events, effective logistics planning is critical as is the coordination of numerous types of resources. Similarly, administering multiple small scale training events, such as a specific training session that is presented at a large number of sites across the country, also requires careful logistical planning and resource coordination. Identifying and securing facilities, lining up trainers, producing training materials, providing for technology support, and coordinating participant registration are all tasks that must be carried out flawlessly for these events to be successful. In some cases, promoting and marketing the event to prospective participants is also a critical success factor.

The development of relevant content and the selection of knowledgeable and engaging presenters are two tasks that are particularly central to the success of national, regional, and local conferences or training sessions. Information presented must be evidence-based and must represent best practices in the field. EMT uses a database developed for each project that identifies a large pool of consultants with detailed profiles that have been vetted by the funder. Trainers are selected by EMT's senior staff and are presented to the client agency for final approval prior to placement in a conference or training agenda. All trainers are evaluated by the participants using carefully designed evaluation forms.

For all TA and training projects, EMT constructs a database system to track service requests. In addition to providing real-time status for all requests, the database is a primary source for the production of monthly reports detailing the activities and status of all TA and training services.

Expertise in Developing and Disseminating TA and Training Products Based on Research and Field Findings

EMT has extensive experience in the creation, production, and dissemination of training and informational materials. We produce newsletters, bulletins, topical resource materials, and other informational products based on current research results. For most TA and training products, we also are asked to produce case study descriptions of promising and exemplary program initiatives. Well before evidence-based practice became a popular professional focus, EMT used the tools of applied research and program evaluation in the design and production of informational products.

Expertise in Identifying and Managing the Use of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

All technical assistance and training projects involve the use of subject matter experts (SMEs) as trainers, advisors, on-site consultants, and authors of informational materials. As noted earlier, EMT develops an extensive referral system of SME contacts. This network, along with a systematic review procedure, allows us to identify relevant expertise to address specific issues as they emerge from the field either through the evolving needs of program-level staff or through the evolving priorities of the funder. Detailed profiles of SMEs are compiled, to include areas of expertise, experience as a trainer, experience as an author and developer of training curricula, and cultural background. SME profiles are provided to the client agency for review and approval.

Expertise in Using Technology in the Delivery of Technical Assistance and Training Services

EMT has always been an innovator in the use of technology-based support and resources for training, TA and information dissemination. Chief among these technology innovations are the development of online training courses, the use of webinars to deliver training, and the development of sophisticated project websites to support multiple aspects of the technical assistance and training project.

- Through support of two National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants, EMT has developed an extensive library of evidence-based **online training courses** for service providers. To date, over 40 courses have been developed and offered to targeted audiences. These courses are self-paced and interactive; learners can access the courses at any time over the Internet and can work through the course as their own pace. All courses contain carefully drafted text, supporting graphics, and interactive animations in delivering content. Proficiency tests and evaluation surveys accompany each course.

- In addition to online courses, EMT administers **live online training sessions** (webinars) using technology platforms designed for this purpose. (EMT's webinar platform is iLinc.) Participants join a session over the Internet at a specific time and engage in a virtual classroom environment. Subject matter experts lead the session using PowerPoint presentations, website navigation, and whiteboard diagrams. Audio is supplied via telephone conference technology.

- For large-scale TA and training projects, a EMT develops a **project website** that promotes training opportunities, provides access to informational resources, serves as a portal to self-paced online training courses, and encourages the TA and training client community to submit individual requests for assistance. The design and development of a quality website requires both technical skills and attention to functionality and content input from the client community. EMT has a strong technical team for website development capable of deploying important website features such user-friendly navigation, logical organization of webpages, keyword search, resource repositories, web-based forms, and pleasing graphical design. Websites are designed to meet standards related to security and accessibility (i.e.508 compliance).

Project Management Systems and Procedures

For any large TA and training initiative, the principles and practices of project management must be a key concern. Project tasks must be delivered on time and within budget with full accountability to the client embedded in project management systems and procedures. To achieve this goal, several important elements are built into every project.

Delineation of Responsibilities

Clear delineation of project responsibilities is critical to the success of any project. Coordination of project activities in ensured by control exercised by the Project Director in directing all team member and by active communication among all parties. Internally, communication between the Officer-In-Charge (OIC), Project Director, Fiscal Officer and project staff is critical. Externally, communication between the OIC and Project Director with key client staff is critical, often facilitated by weekly conference calls. Coordination with subcontractors and technical consultants can also be challenging in TA and training projects. In EMT's management system, the Project Director is directly responsible for this coordination.

Work Schedule Controls

EMT reviews project priorities and resource allocation with clients the outset of the project. Review meetings are held throughout the project period and no tasks are changed without the prior approval of the client. EMT has developed a project task management system that tracks tasks and activities on a monthly basis. This system provides project managers with a tool to examine project assignments with staff and discuss the status of proposed work activities. It also delineates all costs incurred in the project to date and against the proposed budget. These project spreadsheets are fundamental to EMT's success in managing all projects within budget.

Reporting to the client is based upon clear definition of project milestones and specific task assignments. EMT reports on planned versus actual progress for tasks underway and on planned versus actual resource utilization. Our reporting reviews technical progress and problems incurred during task performance using monthly reports, ad-hoc written memos, and oral reports. Formal and informal review meetings are held at least monthly, with additional reviews occurring as events dictate. For the start-up phase of a project, the team typically meets weekly. These meetings discuss contract progress, problems, alternative solutions, resource expenditures, and projected task performance.

Fiscal Controls

EMT maintains a federally approved corporate accounting system (Deltec software) featuring cost controls that encompass a prescribed cycle of projection, authorization, approval, and review. This system records all actual expenditures and commitments and provides various financial and human resource reports for management review. All resources (labor and direct cost) used in the performance of the project are recorded, accumulated, and reviewed through monthly time sheets, purchase orders, and supplier invoices. EMT has an automated Fiscal

Control System (FCS) that tracks expenses on a project-by-project basis. This system provides for accurate, project-specific cost accountability, and enables the Project Director to detect imbalances and make any changes in cost categories before they become serious. Our system provides for detailed budgeting in the current fiscal year, analysis of total project budgets, provisions for contract modifications, and other features. In addition to recording actual costs incurred, records are maintained on commitments for expenditures. These commitments, in general, represent obligations that have been made but not yet paid (e.g., travel orders and purchase orders). All labor, material and other direct charges incurred and recorded in the books of original entry are subsequently posted to a ledger where complete, detailed cost records are maintained for each job. Annually, EMT is subjected to an A-133 audit with results submitted to the Federal government. In addition, EMT submits financial reports to the National Institute of Health, our Federal Fiscal Agency for a determination of our indirect rate schedule.

Conclusion

The intent of this paper has been to convey to clients and consulting partners the approach that EMT Associates takes in conducting technical assistance and training projects. Our approach has evolved over many years of conducting these types of projects and reflects both common practices that any consulting firm would be expected to implement as well as innovative practices that only EMT and perhaps a few other firms might offer. Together, these practices represent an approach that is comprehensive, client-centric, and evidence-based.

For additional information, please contact EMT at (916) 983-6680 or email us at info@emt.org.