



The Australian Prevention
Partnership Centre
Systems and solutions for better health

System action learning

What it is

Foster-Fishman and Watson¹ define the **system action learning** process as an ongoing problem-solving cycle. It involves a process of learning in which people understand what is causing the problems they see, design innovative strategies to address these problems, and then carry out actions and learn about whether those actions made a difference in solving the problem.

How we applied it

In the system action learning phase of the Prevention Tracker project, the aim was to identify local prevention activities and identify opportunities to incorporate system learning processes into them – applying systems thinking at a scale of day-to-day practice.

System action learning in Prevention Tracker took place in three projects across two communities in late 2017 to mid-2018. The projects were identified by the research team in conjunction with our community partners. The partners identified areas of action which they were working on currently, and, in particular, projects which they believed would benefit from the application of a systems lens and systems learning.

The following steps describe the system action learning process:

1	Undertake project operational meetings as usual
2	Complete a system action learning pre-workshop template and forward to the Prevention Tracker team. The team to work through template and identify areas for potential action learning
3	Undertake a 2–3 hour workshop (face-to-face or via teleconference) with the Prevention Tracker team to identify and work through opportunities for learning about the system and the factors which currently hold it in place or which might potentially enable or constrain change in the desired direction
4	Complete a post-workshop template, demonstrating the learnings from the workshop and the intended actions to be undertaken as a consequence of the workshop
5	Undertake action on the identified project, based on the workshop insights
Undertake the next operational meeting and begin the cycle again	

For each project, a cycle was undertaken 3 or 4 times, building on both the learning and the actions to identify intended and actual change. At the end of the final workshop, there was a short reflective session to elicit the overall experience and learning from the system action learning process. The three action learning projects covered the following public health areas:

- Evaluation
- Program delivery
- Community coalition/network.

What we learnt about how to use this method

The application of a systems action learning process enabled us to understand what it takes to incorporate systems thinking into prevention efforts. It provided an opportunity for teams working on prevention projects in the communities to use and engage with systems thinking tools and resources that could be applied to future work.

What we learnt about the system from using this method

The use of the systems action learning approach in Prevention Tracker offered a unique opportunity for researchers and community partners to interrogate local systemic problems and actions together, to provide systems-level insights into the way things work. These insights allowed the teams to identify both potential areas for action (leverage points), as well as possible barriers to systemic change.

Where to go if you need more information

- Foster-Fishman P and Watson E. The ABLe Change Framework: A conceptual and methodological tool for promoting systems change. 2012. *Am J Community Psychol*. Vol. 49(3–4): 503–16.
- Reynolds M. Triple-loop learning and conversing with reality. 2014. *Kybernetes*, 43(9/10);1381–1391.
- Snyder W and Wenger E *Our World as a Learning System: A Communities-of Practice Approach*. 2010. *Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice*. Blackmore C [ed] Springer London;107–24.
- Wadsworth Y. *Building in Research and Evaluation: Human Inquiry for Living Systems*. 2011. Action Research Press, Hawthorn.

Reference

1. Foster-Fishman P and Watson E. Facilitating Systemic Action Learning. ABLe Change Framework. Available at: www.ablechange.msu.edu



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