

## Activity: Scaling Pre-Mortem

(90 minutes)

### Overview

It is an exciting moment when your team has developed a practice that creates positive results for your students, and it is tempting to abandon the iterative testing cycles that developed the new practice and rapidly scale it up. Resisting that temptation is helpful for avoiding common implementation pitfalls, but continuing testing cycles is not always enough to guarantee successful implementation at scale. This activity involves teams in predicting the factors that could lead to both a successful and a failed scaling effort of their change idea. It is called a pre-mortem, rather than a post-mortem, because it involves diagnosing the causes of our work's success or failure in advance, and helps visualize the ways in which ramping up to scale is different than the testing we have done so far. The activity finishes by turning participants' predictions into a set of action steps for avoiding pitfalls and maximizing chances of success.

### Objective

To complete a pre-mortem of your effort to scale up a successful change idea, identifying in advance several potential reasons why the effort may succeed or fail, and turning these into a list of implications and action steps that will guide your work in the months ahead.

### When to Use

- You have a change idea that has been successfully developed through testing and shows clear promise, and
- You are planning to take that change idea from its early testing ground and expand it across your school community.

This activity also has value as a way to preview the scaling process for a group of stakeholders. If you are new to using PDSA ramps to iteratively scale up a new practice, this activity can help introduce your team to the process and give team members a safe space to lay out their concerns.

## Number of Participants

It is important to involve all important stakeholders in this process to avoid blind spots. You should consider including:

- all members of the improvement team
- other members of the school community who may become more involved as the practice spreads (optional)
- school leadership (optional)

## Materials

- Copies of your driver diagram
- Details of your change idea
- Graphic organizers (attached), including extra copies of the final page

## Facilitation Notes

### 1. Introduction and Framing (5 minutes)

- Welcome participants and review the objective of the activity.
- Congratulate them on their work to get to this point; the fact that they are engaging in this activity means that they have had success in developing a change idea into a successful practice, and the potential of that practice is why they are here.
- Read participants the following:

*“There are distinct challenges that occur in the transition from working on a small scale to implementing on a large one. As work grows beyond a size where a small group can control all the details, the pitfalls and threats that were previously caught and dealt with can more easily go unnoticed and derail a project. Often these predictable challenges go unpredicted until it is too late and valuable time has been lost.*

*“Today’s activity is called a pre-mortem, rather than a post-mortem, because we are going to diagnose the causes of our work’s success or failure **in advance**. By doing so, we will have a clearer picture of what we can do to ensure our work is successful.”*

- Outline the four parts of the agenda for participants:
  1. Review their theory of improvement
  2. Break into two teams to anticipate causes of success and failure
  3. Share these stories of success and failure
  4. Discuss implications and plan action steps

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## 2. Review Your Theory of Improvement (5 minutes)

- Share your team’s theory of improvement (driver diagram) with participants. Ask them to spend 2–3 minutes discussing in pairs or small groups the following guiding questions:
  - Why did we choose this change idea(s) to accomplish our aim?
  - What are the benefits—both short- and long-term—of our chosen change idea(s)?
  - What other drivers and change ideas might be helpful as we expand to new contexts?
- Ask for volunteers to share out one or two ideas from their small discussion that might be helpful to prime the larger group’s thinking.

## 3. Split Into Teams (5 minutes)

- Tell participants that the next step in this activity involves splitting into two teams: the optimists and the pessimists. The first team will craft a story of successfully scaling an implementation, while the second team will craft a story of a failed attempt to scale and implement. Both will use the same promising change idea as a starting point.
- Assign teams or allow participants to self-select, then tell them they are going to spend 3–4 minutes quietly brainstorming causes of success or failure of the effort to scale the change idea. Ask them to:
  - be realistic and choose significant (not small) and likely issues.
  - include partial successes and failures along the way.
  - try to represent multiple types of challenges that frustrated/were overcome.

## 4. Crafting Stories in Teams (35 minutes)

- Ask the two teams to start working together to craft a step-by-step story of the journey from today’s promising change idea to an eventual success or failure.
- Tell them to use the ideas they have brainstormed as a starting point, but not to limit themselves to those ideas. At the top of the graphic organizer is a list of example issues to jumpstart their thinking.
- Remind them that the more realistic the story is, the more helpful it will be for anticipating real challenges.
- If you have included stakeholders who haven’t been involved in testing or trained in improvement science, you should check for understanding of PDSA tests and of the term “burst” to describe using multiple PDSA tests to refine and optimize a practice. Make sure everyone in the room understands these concepts. See Chapter 3 of the handbook for further reference.

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- Encourage the teams to use the graphic organizers to record key elements of the story, and remind them that they will be coming back together to share in approximately 30 minutes.

#### 5. Share Stories with Whole Group (20 minutes)

- Bring the two teams back together and explain that the purpose of this next step is to compare two perspectives of how your work might go.
- Teams will take turns telling their stories to the whole group, as a team, or through representatives.
- The listening team members should take notes on any details that resonate with them. These notes will be the foundation of the final part of the activity.
- Offer the listening team the opportunity to ask clarifying questions, particularly around the reasons why successes/failures occurred in the story.
- Switch roles so that the second team shares and the first team listens, repeating the same steps.

#### 6. Collect Implications and Next Steps (20 minutes)

- The final step of the activity is to draw out the implications for the team's ongoing work that have been raised over the course of the activity. Lead an open discussion, taking notes as you go or delegating notetaking responsibilities. Make sure the following three steps are all completed:
  - Invite the group to share any of the issues—either positive or negative—that they think have implications for their scaling effort. Encourage participants to explain their thinking, and allow others to respond.
  - Prioritize from among the ideas in order to decide which of the issues are the most important to focus on. Decide among your team how many are high priority.
  - Decide on action steps connected to each high-priority issue, including when these steps should be taken and who will take them. Feel free to use a white board or chart paper to help participants make connections between each implication and the action steps they agree on.
- When you are finished, make sure your notes include all decisions made thus far, and thank participants for their participation.

## Scaling Pre-Mortem Graphic Organizer

**Instructions:** Work together with your team to craft a step-by-step story of your team’s scaling journey as if it already occurred. Start from today’s change idea and detail how and why you eventually succeeded or failed.

- Brainstorm potential issues you predict you may face as you scale and use these as a starting point. Use the list of examples below to aid your thinking.
- Be realistic about the issues that will be faced in the story; the more realistic they are, the more useful they will be for anticipating real challenges.
- Use this graphic organizer’s guiding questions to help record key elements of the story as you go. It is broken down into “bursts” of PDSA tests. Use these to describe multiple consecutive tests of a similar scale and in a similar context. When the scale increases, testing moves to a new context, or the change idea(s) is modified, you should record this as a new burst.
- Don’t skimp on the details; they will make your story more compelling when you share.

### Example issues that schools may face/overcome as they scale up a practice:

- Adapting to new content areas or grade levels
- Finding time, or unrealistic timeframes
- Challenges collecting data for measuring progress
- Communicating the importance of the change
- Managing testing outside the improvement team
- Adapting to diverse needs of different students
- Investing others in the work
- Feasibility for early-career teachers
- Alignment with other school programs
- Involving or informing parents
- Managing skill transfer to other teachers
- Alignment with other leadership priorities

Change Idea	Aim
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### PDSA Burst #1

Describe the change in scale or context (e.g., new classroom, different grade, different subject, etc.)	How many tests will happen in this burst?
Will it succeed? Will it fail?  Why?	
What refinements will you make? Will you pivot in a new direction? Where will you go next?	

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PDSA Burst # \_\_\_\_\_

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