



**Operations Improvement
Playbook
for Employment Social
Enterprises (ESEs)**

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Introduction

Orientation to the Operations Improvement Playbook

The original version of this Operations Improvement Playbook for Employment Social Enterprises (ESEs) (hereinafter referred to as the “playbook”) was developed in August and September of 2022. The insights and content of this playbook draw primarily from the experiences of Greg Payne, a member of REDF’s independent consultant pool who is also a Farber alum.¹ Mr. Payne has significant experience in operations and consulting work with impact enterprises and with intermediaries in the impact enterprise ecosystem. He worked directly with the REDF team to develop this playbook and to design it in such a way that makes it as useful and relevant as possible to those directly involved in operations improvement efforts for ESEs.²

As a matter of orientation, it’s worth noting that this playbook:

- **Tailors its advice and guidance to *early-stage* ESEs:** “Early-stage” in this instance is broadly understood as ESEs with annual revenue under \$2M, but who have successfully demonstrated some product- or service-market fit and who also have a relatively well-defined target population with which they are already working. For these organizations, operations improvement is often a high priority and necessary for moving the ESE from a stage of *exploring and refining where our mission and market focus should be* (usually the highest priority for ESEs in the much earlier “launch” phases) to *optimizing resource use in order to maximize impact, profit, and efficiency*. In this latter phase, an early-stage ESE is likely interested in taking steps to improve processes, procedures, systems, and other elements of their operations.³
- **Is designed with a “newly-onboarded COO of an ESE” in mind:** Most of the playbook is written to directly address the Chief Operating Officer (COO) or operations leader of an ESE (when I use the pronoun “you” that’s usually the person to whom I’m referring). This playbook is also designed in a timeline fashion starting with “day one” (and the corresponding “Step One”) as the first day of this individual’s work at the ESE or new role as the operations leader, and this playbook focuses its guidance on the steps and frameworks that will be specifically useful to improve the organization’s operations. Anyone who is not directly involved in operations may find this guide lacking advice or guidance related to marketing, strategy, or programs. However, these same individuals may benefit from this guide by using it to reflect on the interconnections between operations

¹ To avoid confusion, most uses of personal pronouns such as “I” or “me” in this playbook refers to the author, Greg Payne. For the sake of this paragraph alone, however, I’m referring to myself in the third person

² Please feel free to connect with me on LinkedIn and let me know that you read this playbook (I’d be thrilled to hear from you and hear your thoughts and feedback) - [Linkedin.com/in/gpayne2](https://www.linkedin.com/in/gpayne2)

³ I want to be sure to emphasize that if you’re reading this and you don’t feel you meet this definition of an early-stage ESE, you can still benefit from this Playbook. Many of the insights can be applicable and useful for a broad range of ESEs!

and their functional focus and can use this guide as a way to better engage in conversations with those focused on operations.

- **Incorporates an organizational change management lens on operations improvement:** Improving or adjusting any aspect of an organization must take into account how to make those changes “stick” and be meaningful to the organization’s growth. This playbook therefore not only provides guidance on how to identify and prioritize operations challenges, it also provides critical guidance on how to go about engaging, aligning, and focusing key stakeholders and other resources during operations improvement so that any changes are adopted as seamlessly as possible by the organization.
- **Is not intended to reflect universally applicable best practices:** This playbook is best used as a guide and reference - it should not be seen as a prescription for all ESEs. Given the broad variety of models, markets, and supported populations of ESEs, it would be impossible for any playbook to give guidance that’s relevant to all operations challenges or scenarios that any ESE may encounter. There may therefore be challenges and scenarios that an ESE encounters that could prompt updates or changes to this playbook. Those updates and changes are welcome and encouraged, and I would be thrilled to hear your thoughts and feedback! (I have in fact designed this playbook to be easily adapted over time, so your input could even find its way into a future version.)

What is “operations improvement” anyways, and why is it important?

It’s important for us to address a few definitions up front so that the playbook’s scope and purpose is well understood. When it comes to “operations” or “operations management,” there are a few ways we can define it. The following definition gives us a useful orientation for this playbook: **“operations management is the administration of business practices to create the highest level of efficiency possible within an organization.”**⁴ “Efficiency” can be phrased in another way – “doing more with your available resources.” Therefore, operations **improvement** is about *improving* the administration of business practices within an organization in order to get more done and make more impact with your available resources. The “business practices” or elements that are addressed in some way in this playbook are:

- **Procedures, Processes, and Policies:** These lie at the core of operations (and will almost always be impacted by operations improvement), as they guide and direct how things should be done in an organization. *Procedures* typically define specific tasks, *processes* usually define how several procedures fit together in order to take an input into the organization and produce an output from the organization, and *policies* define the standards or strategy that give direction to all of the above. As an example, a *procedure* might be step-by-step instructions for a single person, showing that person how to schedule a job so that it can be

⁴ Investopedia, [“Operations Management”](#)

- invoiced correctly. The invoicing *process* involves a number of steps starting with a customer's job request and resulting in an invoice to the customer (of which the above job scheduling *procedure* is a part). An organization's invoicing *policy* might state that all invoices will be sent to customers within 10 days of a job's completion (setting the standard which the invoice process and procedures should follow).
- **Technology & Systems:** Technology and systems in this context refer to the platforms, hardware, and applications that an organization uses to support operations. It's important to note that any technology or systems that are used by an organization must *fit with* and enable efficient and effective execution of the organization's procedures, processes, and policies. This means that whatever technology or systems are used must help procedures and processes flow more quickly and/or with more accuracy. Critically, any technology or systems must be *usable* by the individuals involved in those procedures and processes. This is a point worth re-emphasizing, as the "best" technology or system for a given process may in fact not necessarily be "high tech" and instead be pen & paper or a spreadsheet, as no other available (or affordable) technology or system fits for the situation or is most usable by the individuals involved in the procedure or process.
 - **Communication & Training:** *Effective* communication within an organization helps to ensure that all individuals have the information they need to do their job effectively, efficiently, and safely. When an organization surpasses *effective* communication and achieves *excellent* communication, that organization builds confidence that there is strong leadership and strong team cohesion, that the organization provides opportunities for development & advancement for its team members, and that the organization has the capacity to grow overall. Training often comes hand-in-hand with communication, as critical skills or understanding can be transferred even through simple or informal messaging. (See [this appendix](#) for more on how the RISE framework can be used to assist with informal messaging.)
 - **Financial Management:** As it applies to this playbook, financial management includes the operational elements that are concerned with understanding and controlling the organization's finances to include having visibility into cash flow, understanding how operational funds are being spent on a monthly, quarterly, and annual basis, understanding the direct costs associated with producing and delivering goods or services, and setting up processes or controls to ensure that accounts receivable (AR) and accounts payable (AP) are processed in a timely and accurate fashion. Within this playbook, raising external capital (of any kind - grants, debt, or equity) is not addressed.

- **Leadership, Management, & Team Members:** This playbook does not venture into depth on topics related to human resources or workforce development (indeed, the REDF Baseline Assessment has “Human Capital” as its own separate Baseline Module).⁵ However, definition of roles & responsibilities and setting job expectations often come hand-in-hand with parts of the above elements.

Ultimately, the target outcome of operations improvement is that the organization *can do more with available resources*. For an early-stage ESE that has already refined its mission and market focus, this can be incredibly important as increased operational efficiency helps the ESE to hire more employees, enables it to provide higher-quality skills development opportunities, and can even increase end customer satisfaction and loyalty through improved product or service delivery.

Just a few reasons why operations improvement can be beneficial to early-stage ESEs

- ✓ Improves employee and management retention by reducing burnout caused by processes that consume too much time or require rework
- ✓ Allows the organization to focus more time and resources on employee supports, skill development, and team building
- ✓ Increases customer satisfaction by reducing time-to-delivery of products or services, by minimizing mistakes, and by allotting more team member time to customer relationship development

⁵ See [this appendix](#) for more on how the REDF Baseline Assessment maps to the elements discussed in this playbook

Core principles of organizational operations improvement for early-stage ESEs

Organizational operations improvement can get complex and overwhelming at times, and there may even be moments where the focus seems unclear or the intended outcomes uncertain. The below three principles can help guide your path in these moments. I recommend printing out this page and posting it on the wall in your office, as reflecting on these principles in moments of murkiness or uncertainty can help you re-invigorate or re-focus your efforts simply by asking, “Where might we be lacking in any of these areas, or where could I take one new action today or this week in one of these areas?” You might be surprised how much this exercise can help!

- **Key Stakeholder Alignment and Frequent Communication are Critical** - It is up to you to decide who a “key stakeholder” is.⁶ Once you’ve identified your key stakeholders, be sure to ask yourself every once in a while, “Am I communicating with those individuals and organizations who are directly impacted by (or who can provide support for) the improvement activities we’re undertaking?” If there’s anyone you think is missing or anyone you haven’t updated recently, consider engaging them with an email, a phone call, or a meeting. Energetically engaging them with a short update can make a huge difference (and - in the event the topic arises - be ready to share with them what kind of support you may need from them).
- **Celebrate Wins (Even Small Ones!)** - Success begets success, and that good feeling of accomplishment can build the important drive for more team wins. When there’s a win or a success (no matter how small), be sure to share it with key stakeholders and acknowledge those who contributed. Noting when things don’t work as planned can be healthy too, as long as those conversations avoid the “blame game” and instead are focused on learning by identifying what can be done differently in the future.⁷ But - it can’t be stressed enough - make an effort to find the wins, amplify the wins, and celebrate those who played a part!
- **Prioritize and Keep. It. Simple.** - This may be the most important principle of all. Many times during organizational operations improvement, focus can be lost simply because key stakeholders aren’t clear on what’s the most important priority for the organization when it comes to operations improvement. This can affect big decisions as well as many smaller day-to-day decisions, potentially adding up to an operations improvement effort that’s off track and progress is difficult to assess. In these moments it may be useful to revisit your priorities and asking yourself (and your stakeholders), “What are our current priorities, and have our priorities shifted?” And, when it comes to (re)defining and communicating your priorities, keep it simple. In your key stakeholder conversations, consider agreeing to no more than 3 priority areas for operations improvement (even just 1 is OK for the first several months!). This may seem contradictory to your instinct (after all, there’s may be so much to do!), but in fact, focusing the bulk of your improvement efforts on one to three

⁶ You can find more guidance on this in “Step Two” of the playbook or in [this appendix](#)

⁷ More on downfalls of and alternatives to “the blame game” in organizations can be found in this [HBR article](#)

top priorities can have a ripple effect throughout the organization and on all of your other priority areas.

How this playbook is organized

Keeping in mind that this is a playbook intended to be handed to a COO or other operations leader on their first day at an early-stage ESE, this document is organized with a time-phased approach according to what this individual should keep in mind in the first 12 to 18 months of their work with the ESE.⁸ Each section of this playbook corresponds to the below five steps for the overall operations improvement effort. (Note that the “operations improvement projects” or OIPs referenced in the graphic are focused projects to address specific operational challenges, and are explained further in the corresponding sections of the playbook.)



It’s worth emphasizing (and re-emphasizing) that the above is not prescriptive and that the experience of any given COO or operations leader will vary widely. However, the above timeline of broad “steps” may be a useful reference for a newly onboarded operations leader to understand where they should focus their time and effort in order to further operations improvement.

⁸ Note that this timeline of priorities doesn’t take into account any regular operational responsibilities or other priorities that fall outside of the scope of “operations improvement.”

The Operations Improvement Playbook

Step One: Address urgent issues or risks

Overview

On day one of your role as the operations leader at an early-stage ESE, it's essential that you work to understand whether there are any major issues or risks that need to be addressed within days or weeks. This step is *not* about solving ALL safety and security concerns, rather it's about risk assessment to make sure there's no *critical* issues or risks that need addressing before other operations improvement efforts can commence. A *critical* issue or risk is one that is either *currently* affecting team members or the organization, or one that is somewhat likely to occur and - if it does - could have a *serious impact* on team members or the organization.

Activities

- As you have your initial conversations with the organizational leadership and others involved in operations, ask questions about if there are any major issues or risks of which they're aware (use the below checklist as a guide). If you can find dedicated 1-on-1 time with the executive director or CEO to ask them questions, even better. You may also keep the below checklist in mind as you go through your own onboarding and begin to review the organization's documentation, files, or shared drive information.
- As you go through the below checklist on your own or with others in the organization, you may find it useful to use [this matrix and guide](#) to help determine whether an issue or risk falls into the category of "critical" and warrants immediate action.
- The below checklist may be useful to your own exploration or to conversations with others in the organization. Note that it's OK if some of these don't apply to your organization, or if you have difficulty finding a clear answer in your first few weeks. This checklist is simply intended to help you identify anything that may be critical.
 - **Insurance:** Does the organization have its required insurance up to date? (And, even better, is all related paperwork - physical or digital - stored in a secure, accessible location so that it can be referenced when needed?). The below links provide some guidance on what types of insurance may be required (however, the below links should not be considered comprehensive nor necessarily tailored to your specific situation, but they may be a good starting point).
 - <https://www.sba.gov/business-guide/launch-your-business/get-business-insurance>
 - <https://www.insureon.com/states>
 - **Licensing and registration:** Does the organization have all required licenses and registrations that it needs to legally operate? Spending a moment to verify that required licenses and registrations are up to date could help avoid serious situations in the future. (And, even better, is all related paperwork - physical or digital - stored in a secure, accessible location so that it can be referenced when needed?)

- To double-check what licenses or registration requirements are relevant to your organization's situation, you may find it useful to Google the following terms with your state in the blank noted below:
 - <YOUR STATE> business registration and license requirements
 - <YOUR STATE> is my small business in good standing
- **Facilities:** Do all locks or facilities access systems work? Are all keys or access cards accounted for? Does anyone who recently left the organization have keys, access cards, or access codes to facilities? If any keys or cards are missing, or if a previous employee has access codes, is this a major security or safety concern? Are there any major hazards in any facilities (e.g., leaks, electrical issues, fire hazards, etc.)?
- **Work sites:** Are the work sites free of major hazards? Are team members doing any tasks that are particularly hazardous and - if so - do they have the proper training, equipment, and guidance to do these tasks safely? (If not, you may want to consider putting a stop on these tasks until basic safety precautions can be put in place)
- **Financial and information systems:** Is check-writing authority and power of attorney as it relates to bank account access clear? Does anyone have access to check writing, bank accounts, or any systems used to send or receive funds for the organization (e.g., PayPal, Bill.com, Venmo, Zelle, CashApp, etc.) who shouldn't have this access?
- **Overall team member wellbeing:** Are there any team members in crisis at the moment? This may include mental or emotional crisis, personal issues that are critically affecting work performance or wellbeing, or other critical issues that require immediate attention. This is a judgment call to determine what may need to be addressed immediately versus what can be addressed over time (and therefore may be less critical), but it's important to identify anything that is serious and urgent in nature, and/or that could result in immediate injury or loss of life if left unaddressed for more than a week or two.

Useful Templates or Guides

- Matrix and guide for identifying critical issues or risks ([link](#))

Keep In Mind

This isn't about making major operations improvements, rather it's about *quickly* identifying serious and urgent issues that need to be rapidly addressed in order to avoid critical impacts to the organization.

Step Two: Understand and prioritize operations challenges

Overview

As a newly onboarded COO or operations director, you likely will not be familiar with many of the organization's operations on day one (which is completely OK and understandable!). In order to address these gaps and to build support for operations improvement, it's important to seek broad organizational input and then have deliberate and focused discussions with organizational leadership and other key stakeholders in order to prioritize operations challenges in the early days of your new role. The objectives of these activities should be to (1) identify and understand the major operations challenges the organization is facing, (2) prioritize those challenges and identify the most important 1 to 3 issues or challenges on which to focus initially,⁹ and (3) gain momentum and support from leadership and key stakeholders for the way forward.

Activities

- First, it's important for you to determine who your "operations improvement steering committee" should be. There's no need to officially charter a "steering committee" per se but consider what set of 3 to 5 individuals¹⁰ should be involved in discussing and deliberating the priority focus areas for operations improvement. At the very least, you should involve the CEO or executive director and any leaders and managers in the organization who have a major role in operations. Beyond that, other stakeholders outside of the organization may be worth including in this "steering committee" as long as they have a good understanding of the operations of the organization. (You can use [this guide](#) to help you evaluate stakeholders outside of your organization to determine whether they should be considered for this "steering committee.")
- Next, gather input from as many individuals in the organization as possible. Using a survey like [this one](#) may be helpful in getting feedback from employees, managers, and other leaders throughout the organization. All of the individuals on your "steering committee" should also fill out that same survey. It's important that when you're seeking this input (through surveys, conversations, or other means), that you frame it positively and in a way that encourages constructive input. Depending on who you're surveying or getting input from, you may also elect to ask them to rank the operations challenges they're facing in order of importance (this will contribute to later activities in this step). A few questions or topics of discussion that you may want to bring to these conversations include (for certain

⁹ In some cases, you may encounter some difficulty in reaching consensus on the prioritized list of operations challenges. In these instances, you may find it useful to agree to "timebox" the focus on a particular set of priorities that reflect a majority of leadership and stakeholder opinions, and agree to revisit the prioritization after that period. For example, your message may be – "Looks like most of us agree that invoicing and payroll challenges are the most important things to focus on at the moment, but some of us have a different opinion. Why don't we agree to focus on those top two priorities for 2 months, and revisit the prioritization at that point?"

¹⁰ You may in some instances consider more than 5, but this could become unmanageable for later activities with your steering committee.

stakeholder groups or for your own personal reflection, you may find [these reflection questions](#) useful):

- “We’re excited about continued improvement to how our organization operates and we’d like to seek your input. Off the top of your head, what are your thoughts?”
- “From your perspective, what are some challenges in the organization?”¹¹
- “What - if we were to solve it - would make the *MOST* difference in the organization or in your day-to-day work?”
- Once you have collected input, you may want to spend time reviewing and sorting through the input in preparation for discussions with your “steering committee.” As you sort through input, you can consider grouping certain issues and topics together if you heard similar comments from different people (Ex: A manager says that “payroll” is an important issue and an employee shares that “they’d like to get paid through bank transfer rather than paper check if possible;” in this case, these two issues might be grouped into one). Consider preparing list of 10 to 15 issues or challenges using the input that you gathered.
- Distribute the list of issues or challenges to your “steering committee” and ask them to spend time reviewing the list and determining how they would prioritize the list. You may consider using a survey like the one you’ll find [here](#) to help them quickly rank their choices.
- Review the rankings submitted by the individuals in your “steering committee” and determine where you have consensus (or at the very least majority agreement). If necessary, you may consider holding a meeting of the “steering committee” to review and discuss everyone’s individual rankings as a group. (As you are holding these discussions, be mindful of what issues or challenges – or portions of issues or challenges - may be relatively easy to address. These will be useful during “Step Three” of the playbook.)
- The above activities may take a few weeks and may require some iteration as well. I encourage you to be patient and remember that this is an important step in operations improvement. Once you feel you’ve reached the end of this step, use the checklist below to ensure you have what you need to move on to the next step.
 - You have a prioritized list of operations issues / challenges that should be the focus of the remaining steps in operations improvement, with “steering committee” consensus (or at least majority agreement) on the top 1 to 3 overall issues or challenges
 - You have a sense for enthusiasm and support from key stakeholders for operations improvement.
 - You are starting to get an idea of a few operations challenges that are “low hanging fruit” (more on this in the next step!)

¹¹ Note that in some cases you may get responses to this kind of open question that don’t fall into the category of challenges related to operations, but this is OK as it’s best to get as much input and feedback and sort/filter this input later.

Useful Templates or Guides

- Guide on identifying and evaluating key stakeholders ([link](#))
- Reflection questions on operations challenges ([link](#))
- Stakeholder surveys for operational issues and for issue prioritization ([link](#))

Keep In Mind

Opening dialogue with leadership, management, employees, and other key stakeholders is critical to signaling your commitment to stewarding operations improvement and building confidence in the organization that you are interested in gaining diverse perspectives on operations challenges.

Step Three: Tackle “low-hanging fruit”

Overview

The concept of “low-hanging fruit” is one that is frequently used in organizational improvement to refer to *relatively easy* actions that can deliver a disproportionately large positive impact. The metaphor refers to harvesting fruit from a tree - if you wanted to reach a bounty of fruit at the very top of the tree, you may need a ladder, tools, and perhaps even many extra hands to help you get to that fruit 15 or 20 feet off the ground. And - while that fruit may well be worth the effort, it will take time to plan, prepare, and gather all of the tools and support needed to reach it. In the meantime, you can direct your attention lower on the tree and with just a bit of searching and relatively little effort, you can find and pick off the fruit that is hanging within arm’s reach. In this way, you and your team can quickly enjoy the reward of accomplishment and build the momentum that’s needed to harvest the “fruit” that may require more effort and planning. The below recommended approach will help you to identify and tackle any “low-hanging fruit” and build that momentum towards more complex operational improvement efforts

Activities

- Revisit the results of your stakeholder discussions in “Step Two.” Reflect on any issues or challenges that appear to have an easy or straightforward solution, or where significant progress could be made with relatively limited effort. To help you with this activity, ask yourself the following questions:
 - Are any of these issues or challenges something that could be solved within a few days or a week (at most)?
 - Are there *portions* of any issues or challenges that could be solved within a few days or a week (at most)?
- If you’ve answered “yes” to either question above, then you’re on your way to identifying an area of focus to tackle “low-hanging fruit.” If you haven’t answered “yes” to either of the above, that’s OK. You can move on to “Step Four” for now and revisit this step later to see if new insights have emerged that help you.
- If you’ve identified more than one issue or challenge that is potentially “low-hanging fruit,” use the below questions to help you select which one issue or challenge that may be best to focus on:
 - For which one of these issues or challenges do I have most (or all) of the skills needed to develop and deliver a usable solution in a few days or a week at most?¹²

¹² It’s understandable and reasonable that you may want to involve other team members in tackling “low-hanging fruit.” In fact, that can help with building team cohesion and momentum for later operations improvement efforts! However, it’s important to remember that tackling “low-hanging fruit” should be a relatively light lift - involving one or two other team members is OK if their support or particular skills are needed, but it’s advisable to make sure that any work related to tackling “low-hanging fruit” doesn’t cause a significant disruption to other responsibilities.

- For which one of these issues or challenges will the solution require relatively minimal or straightforward communication or training in order to implement?
- Answering “yes” to at least one of the above questions should help you find an issue or challenge that may be a good candidate for “low-hanging fruit.” Again, if you’re still having trouble identifying an issue or challenge that falls into this category, it’s OK to move on to the next step and revisit this one later. You can also take a look at [this appendix](#) for an example of “low-hanging fruit” from operations improvement work I’ve done in the past.

Useful Templates or Guides

- Example of “low-hanging fruit” ([link](#))

Keep In Mind

This is about momentum-building, NOT about solving major issues. Pick something that can be addressed relatively rapidly. Again, you can always come back to this step later on if nothing emerges as a clear candidate for “low-hanging fruit.”

Step Four: Plan & prepare for operations improvement projects (OIPs)

Overview

All of your work in steps one through three have been essential to preparing for a deeper dive into operations improvement projects (OIPs). In the context of this playbook, OIPs are typically projects that last more than just a few weeks and that focus on solving a more complex operations issue or challenge. OIPs usually involve multiple team members and require some data collection and analysis in order to identify the root cause of an operations issue or challenge. Part of an OIP then involves developing and implementing a solution to the root cause, thus making an impact on the operations issue or challenge. The overall purpose of this step – “plan & prepare for operations improvement projects (OIPs)” – is to define the OIPs on which you’ll be focusing and to identify the resources & timeline for that OIP.

Activities

- If you haven’t already, revisit the results of your stakeholder discussions in “Step Two.” Use the overall priorities that resulted from your conversations with the “steering committee,” to identify viable OIPs. Ask yourself:
 - What are the highest priority operations issues or challenges that we’ve agreed to focus on as an organization?
 - Within which issue(s) or challenge(s) can we define a project lasting several weeks in which we can explore root causes and develop and implement a meaningful solution to the issue or challenge?
- Ideally, using the above questions, you have generated ideas for anywhere between 1 to 5 potential OIPs. At this point, it’s worth asking yourself how many OIPs you and the organization can focus on at this moment. There may be resource constraints or other concerns that compel you to limit your focus to only 1 or 2 OIPs for now. If you find yourself needing or wanting to filter the potential OIPs from several to only 1 or 2, use the below questions as a guide:
 - Which potential OIP has a current, active “owner” on staff for the potential solution? While you likely don’t know what the actual solution will ultimately be, you may have a sense for who would be (or should be) the one managing or overseeing the solution once it’s implemented. Or – if you are having trouble identifying that person, this may mean that the organization isn’t ready for this OIP, as organizational roles and responsibilities may need re-defining and/or new hires may need to be brought on board before it makes sense to work on this OIP.
 - Which potential OIP will have minimal disruption to day-to-day operations? In many organizations there are “cycles” throughout the year, and periods where improvements to certain operations may cause more disruption than they are worth. For example, an OIP that is focused on improving the scheduling process may be worth executing when the organization is not in its peak 2 months of the

year. However, if the scheduling process is experiencing major breakdowns or is resulting in other significant impacts to the organization, it may be worth launching this OIP regardless.

- Once you've determined which OIP or OIPs to focus on, complete the OIP charter using [this guide and template](#). The OIP charter is the main output of this step in the playbook, and following the guide and template will help you with putting enough structure around the OIP to move on to "Step Five" in the playbook.

Useful Templates or Guides

- Operations improvement project (OIP) charter ([link](#))

Keep In Mind

Remember that OIP planning and preparation is mostly about (1) double-checking that any given OIP is in line with the highest priorities of the organization, and (2) ensuring there are the right kind of resources available to support the effort. Once you've checked those boxes by completing the OIP charter, you're ready to move on to execution!

Step Five: Execute operations improvement projects (OIPs)

Overview

Once you've moved through steps one through four, you're now ready to execute your operations improvement projects (OIPs). This last step in the playbook is by nature iterative and it can take place over many months. It's important to keep in mind that you, as the COO or operations leader, are ultimately responsible for the execution and progress of OIPs. You may be directly involved in one, many, or perhaps even none of the OIPs that are ready to launch (if you've delegated the day-to-day work on the OIPs to others). Either way, it's critical for you to keep an eye on the status of all OIPs and do whatever you can to help make them successful by following the below activities.

Activities

- As noted above, all of the below activities are *iterative*, meaning that they should be seen as a constant cycle over the months in which you are executing OIPs. It's helpful to keep a mindset where you're not hesitant to revisit certain activities in a non-linear order, or even return to earlier steps in this playbook if you feel it's useful to your overall operations improvement efforts. In [this appendix](#) you'll find examples of a few OIPs I've worked on in past projects – these may offer you ideas or insights that could prove useful as you execute your own OIPs.
- While you are executing OIPs, use the following checklist of activities to guide your work
 - **Execute plan:** Using the OIP charters as a guide, the lead for each OIP should be responsible for developing and managing the plan to achieve the objectives in the OIP. Your role as the COO or operations lead (whether you're the lead for the OIP or not) is to ensure the proper resources are allocated to execute the plan and help to remove any barriers encountered.
 - **Monitor & communicate:** Find a rhythm and method through which you can get regular updates on the status of the OIPs. This may not be formal and doesn't need to be time-consuming – a quick 10-minute weekly or bi-weekly check-in on the status of each OIP can be enough to ensure you're aware of what's happening, to find out if any roadblocks have been encountered, to assist with problem solving, and to provide encouragement.
 - **Celebrate (or pivot):** Recalling the core principles of organizational operations improvement, celebrating wins (even small ones) is critical to the overall success of the effort. In your role, be sure to encourage the teams involved in OIPs to find reasons to celebrate and amplify those successes to the entire organization. In some cases, the team may encounter barriers or even new insights that compel it to change the focus of the OIP. This is OK – just be sure to revisit the OIP charter and make adjustments so everyone's aware of and on board with the adjusted OIP.
 - **Re-assess and prioritize:** As progress is made with OIPs, you may find yourself revisiting and reflecting on the priorities you and your “steering committee” established in “Step Two.” This is natural, as after several months of efforts focused

on OIPs, you may notice significant progress on certain challenges or other challenges emerging as more pressing. At month 3 or 6 of executing OIPs, you may find it useful to revisit the activities in “Step Two” to see if there are any major changes to the prioritization of operations issues or challenges.

- **Repeat:** As already noted above, these activities are iterative – frame the activities involved in executing the OIPs as iterative and feel free to visit and re-visit activities in a non-linear fashion.

Useful Templates or Guides

- Examples of past OIPs ([link](#))
- Quick guide to process improvement and root cause analysis ([link](#))
- Basic 7-day scheduling tool ([link](#))

Keep In Mind

“Perfection is the enemy of good enough” – this quote is one I keep in mind, especially when it comes to operations improvement. Often, significant progress on a challenge can be made in just a few weeks or months, but if you strive for “perfection” it can take *many* more months or even years (and a lot more resources!). Manage expectations for yourself and for your key stakeholders (through your OIP charter and through regular updates), focusing on meaningful yet reasonable and achievable objectives for each OIP (and celebrate those wins and achievements!).

Appendix A: Using the RISE framework to improve task messaging

Through my work I've developed a simple, easy-to-remember framework that I sometimes use when helping leaders and managers of ESEs to improve how they message to their staff and team members. This simple framework called "RISE" may be useful to keep in mind any time you are tasking a team member (i.e., giving them a job or assignment) and can even be utilized when improving procedures and policies or redefining roles & responsibilities.

	What it stands for	What it means for messaging or what to ask yourself before messaging
R	Role & responsibilities	Is this job or assignment I'm giving to this individual within their defined role and responsibilities? If it is, it may be helpful to connect this assignment to their role ("Since you're the shift supervisor, I'd like to ask you to..."). If it isn't, you may want to consider whether this is the person who should be tasked with this assignment, or if it should affect your messaging ("I know this isn't your normal role, but I'd like to see if you could..."). This kind of messaging can help a team member understand if this task is within their expected duties, or if it is a development opportunity (i.e., something that they are being entrusted with beyond their typical role).
I	Information, materials, and supplies	What information, materials, or supplies does this person need to do this job? Do they need an address, phone number, or other contact information for a customer, partner, or team member? Does this mean they need access to a system or a facility? And - do they have the equipment, tools, and other materials they need to get the job done?
S	Skills	All too often overlooked is ensuring that the individual has the skills needed to do the job or assignment. If you're uncertain, you may want to include a message such as "Have you done something like this before?" or "Let's check in a few hours/days after you start this job to see if you have any questions." Even better, you may want to say "Let's do this one time together, and then you can do it on your own after that." Of course, a documented procedure or process for a certain job or assignment can go a long way to transferring the knowledge and skills needed.
E	Expectations	Once again, often overlooked or not emphasized enough - what are the expectations for the completion of this specific job or assignment? Is there a timeline in which this job needs to be completed? Are there quality standards that need to be met? Does some action need to be taken when the job is complete (notify someone, do something in a system, etc.)?

Appendix B: Mapping the business practices or elements in this playbook to the REDF Baseline Assessment Framework


REDF's Baseline Assessment Framework is an excellent tool for ESEs to use when understanding areas to focus on for an operations improvement effort. The business practices or elements of this playbook are not intended to replace that framework - instead they are intended to provide another way of viewing an organization's operations. The below mapping can be used by ESEs and anyone involved in the operations improvement effort to understand how the Baseline Assessment functional areas and evaluation components relate to the business practices or elements that are discussed in this playbook.


Evaluation components (ECs) within the REDF Baseline Assessment framework	Operations Elements in this Playbook				
	Procedures, Processes, and Policies	Technology & Systems	Communication & Training	Financial Management	Leadership, Management, & Team Members
Inventory Management	√	o		o	o
Staffing Management	√	√	√		√
Facilities	o			√	
Equipment	o			√	
Health and Safety	√		o		√
Processes	√	√	√	o	√
Key Metrics	√		o	o	o
Data Access, Usability, and Behaviors	o	√			o
Software	o	√			o
Financial Infras. and Internal Controls	√	√	o	√	o
Financial Planning and Tracking	√	√	o	√	o
Financial Reporting	√	√		√	o
Cash Management	√	√		√	o

Appendix C: Matrix and guide to help you quickly identify critical issues or risks

In order to help you to quickly identify issues or risks that require *immediate* attention, use the below matrix and guide. Note that this guide is not intended to be used in place of the guide on prioritizing operations improvement issues or challenges – this guide is primarily intended to be used to rapidly understand if any issues or risks fall into the category of *critical* and thus require action within a short period of time.

Matrix to assess how *critical* an issue or risk may be

 Increasing impact*	High	(3) Probably not critical, but may be an issue or challenge worth noting for “Step Two”	(2) May also be critical	(1) Critical
	Medium	(3) Probably not critical, but may be an issue or challenge worth noting for “Step Two”	(3) Probably not critical, but may be an issue or challenge worth noting for “Step Two”	(2) May also be critical
	Low	(4) Less likely to be a major concern, but keep an eye on it	(3) Probably not critical, but may be an issue or challenge worth noting for “Step Two”	(3) Probably not critical, but may be an issue or challenge worth noting for “Step Two”
		Low	Medium	High

Increasing probability 

*As it applies to “Step One” in the playbook, it is recommended that for this exercise you consider “impact” as a determination of any impact to people in terms of injury or loss of life

As you learn about operations issues or risks that you want to evaluate for how *critical* they may be, use the above matrix as you go through the below questions:

- **How LIKELY is it that this issue or risk will occur?** For example, if you’re evaluating whether it’s a *critical* issue that one of the locks in your main office is broken, you may want to consider how *likely* it is that an event might result such as an unauthorized person gaining access to your office during business hours or outside of business hours. You might decide that the likelihood (or probability) is “Low” or “Medium” if there are other facility security measures in place (i.e., you have multiple doors to go through, or your office is in a building

where there is a front desk attendant 24x7). On the other hand, you might decide that it is “High” if there are no other facility security measures in place.

- **What will the IMPACT be if the issue or risk occurs?** Continuing with the above example, if an unauthorized person gains access to your main office, what might the impact be? Of course, keeping *things* safe and secure is important, but the safety and security of *people* – including your team members as well as the unauthorized person in this example – is of utmost importance. If you think that, in the event an unauthorized person gains access to your main office, the safety and security of *any* people will be in question (for example – you have dangerous machinery in your main office with which an unauthorized person may injure themselves), then the impact may very well be “High.”

After you’ve evaluated the risks or issues using the above questions, you’ll find yourself with risks or issues falling into one of the below categories:

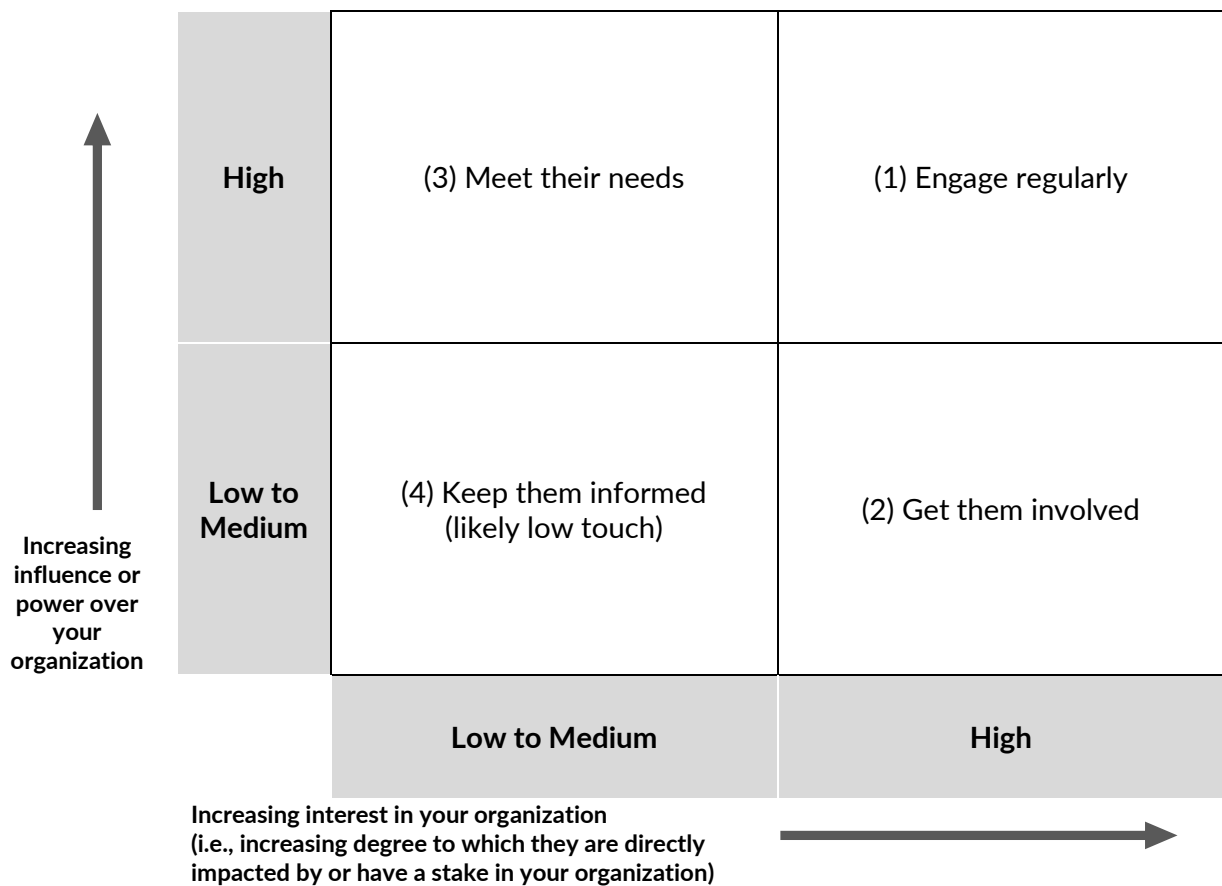
- (1) **Critical:** These are the issues or risks requiring *immediate* action. There may in fact be reason to address the issue or risk within 24 to 48 hours in some cases (or at least make progress on it or find a temporary measure for the time being). It’s advisable that, if you discover that any issues or risks fall into this category, you alert the CEO or executive director to ensure that adequate resources are being directed to respond or mitigate the situation.
- (2) **May also be critical:** These are issues or risks that **may** also require immediate action. If you find that you have issues or risks falling into these categories, briefly revisit them to determine if there’s any chance they are in fact critical. You may find it useful to – at the very least – alert the CEO or executive director that you’ve identified this issue or risk and discovered that it **may** be critical, as the CEO or executive director may have more feedback to provide to determine whether the issue or risk is in fact critical.
- (3) **Probably not critical, but may be an issue or challenge worth noting for “Step Two”:** If you’re confident in your assessment, then the issues or risks in this category probably aren’t critical, and so likely don’t require any immediate action. What’s more – these issues or risks are worth keeping in mind, as they may help you or your key stakeholders think about operations issues or challenges during “Step Two” in the playbook.
- (4) **Less likely to be a major concern, but keep an eye on it:** Once again, if you’re confident in your assessment, then the issues or risks in this category probably aren’t critical. Recommended further action includes simply keeping an eye on them to determine if the “Probability” or “Impact” rating increases.

Appendix D: Identifying and evaluating key stakeholders

During “Step Two” of the playbook, you’re seeking input and involvement from key stakeholders in order to identify and prioritize operations issues and challenges. This brief guide helps you to identify key stakeholders and determine how best to engage with them as you not only work through “Step Two” but also as you continue your role as a leader in the ESE.

First, a definition – a *key stakeholder* refers to a person, group of people, or another organization that is impacted by or has an interest in your organization. Note that key stakeholders can be either inside (i.e., employees, managers) or outside (i.e., funders, government agencies) of your organization. There is likely a large universe of people and organizations that fall into the category of “key stakeholder,” and so evaluating these stakeholders is important in order to determine who to engage, when to engage them, and how to engage them as you work to ensure the success of your organization and its mission.

Matrix to determine how best to engage your key stakeholders



You'll notice two different axes above – “Increasing interest in your organization” and “Increasing influence or power over your organization.” See below for a brief description on each of these:

- **Increasing interest in your organization:** This refers to how much your organization affects or impacts a stakeholder – or, put simply, how much of a *stake* they have in your organization and have a direct interest in your organization succeeding. Remember that this (as well as the next criteria) is relative – some stakeholders will have *more* of a stake than others, and so should be further to the right in the matrix.
- **Increasing influence or power over your organization:** This refers to how much the actions or words of a stakeholder can directly impact *your* organization and lead to its success or failure. Once again, some stakeholders will have *more* influence or power over your organization, and so those stakeholders should be placed higher in the matrix.

Evaluating and re-evaluating stakeholders should be an iterative activity, as over time you may not only continue to discover new stakeholders, but you may also notice that stakeholders *move* from one quadrant to another in the above matrix. Below is a summary of what it means for a stakeholder to fall into any one of the quadrants above, and also suggestions on if and how to involve stakeholders from each quadrant in the activities in “Step Two” of the playbook.

- (1) **Engage regularly:** Once you have completed your stakeholder evaluation, those stakeholders that fall into this quadrant are those that you want to *engage regularly*. They are not only highly impacted by your organization, but they also hold significant influence or power over your organization – so, there is mutual interest in engaging one another regularly. An example of a stakeholder that *may* fall into this category is a very heavily involved, significant funder of your organization. For the purposes of this playbook, you will want to involve in “Step Two” (in some way) of the playbook any stakeholders in this quadrant who also have insight into your organization’s operations.
- (2) **Get them involved:** Those stakeholders that fall into this quadrant are impacted by your organization, but don’t necessarily have *significant* direct influence or power over your organization. What they likely have, however, is eagerness to support or help in any way they can. An example of a stakeholder that *may* fall into this category is a local advocacy organization that supports the same target population as your organization – they are directly impacted by your work, but there may not be *significant* direct influence or power they have over your organization. You may want to get these stakeholders involved where it makes most sense to work on mutually beneficial initiatives. As it applies to this playbook, consider involving in “Step Two” only those stakeholders in this quadrant who have insight into your organization’s operations and who can provide constructive inputs.
- (3) **Meet their needs:** The stakeholders who fall into this quadrant have a lot of influence or power over your organization, but aren’t necessarily significantly impacted by your organization. These are unique stakeholders, as you typically want to simply meet their needs (or, put another way, “keep them happy”), but beyond that no further

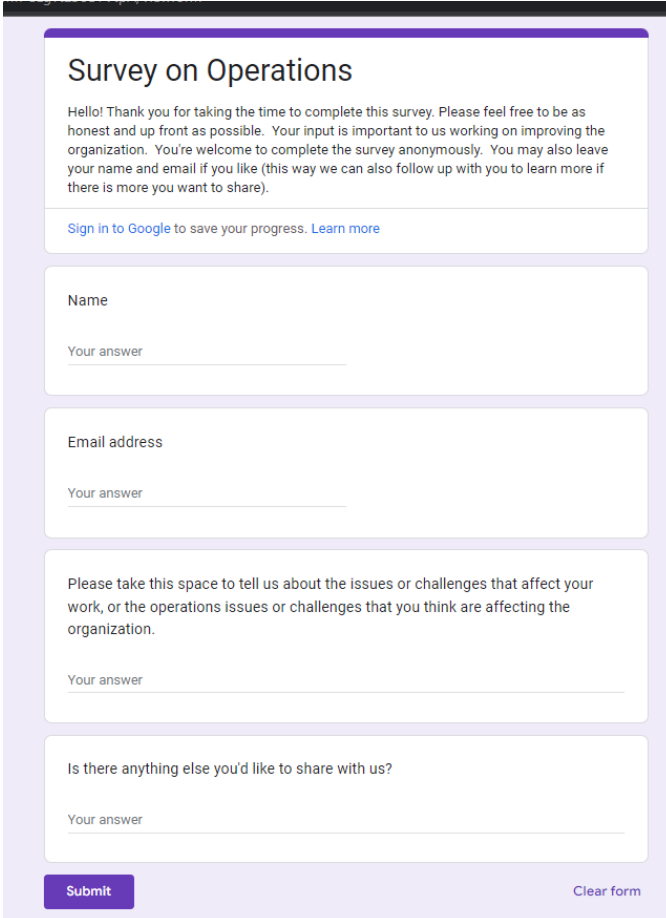
engagement is usually needed. An example that *may* fall into this category is a local government agency that's concerned with licensing or tax collection. Your goal with this kind of stakeholder is simply to meet their needs (i.e., submit your filings on time, complete required reports), because if you don't then you may quickly find yourself facing fines or an inability to operate legally. As it applies to this playbook, it is unlikely that any stakeholder in this quadrant needs to be involved in any activities.

- (4) Keep them informed (likely low touch):** Any stakeholder falling into this quadrant has limited influence or power, and also limited interest. An example *may* be members of the broader public. These stakeholders may be interested in hearing occasional updates through newsletters or press releases, but usually don't need to be engaged more regularly or heavily than that. Similar to stakeholders that fall into quadrant (3), it is unlikely that any stakeholder in this quadrant needs to be involved in any activities related to this playbook.

Appendix E: Stakeholder surveys for input on operational issues

Per the activities in “Step Two” of the playbook, you may find surveys a useful way of getting input from many key stakeholders on what the most important operational challenges are. (Note that there are many other ways to seek input from stakeholders, to include 1-on-1 conversations, which may be more appropriate depending on where you are seeking input.) Below are examples of surveys that you may find useful, as well as some guidance on how to go about grouping or “clumping” certain issues or challenges together in preparation for feedback from your “steering committee.”

- (1) Survey for input from many key stakeholders:** If you decide to use a survey to get input from many key stakeholders at once to understand what issues or challenges they’ve observed or that are affecting them, you may find it useful to have a very open-ended survey. The below screenshot shows what a Google Form survey may look like.



The screenshot shows a Google Form titled "Survey on Operations". The form has a purple header bar. Below the title, there is a paragraph of introductory text: "Hello! Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please feel free to be as honest and up front as possible. Your input is important to us working on improving the organization. You're welcome to complete the survey anonymously. You may also leave your name and email if you like (this way we can also follow up with you to learn more if there is more you want to share)." Below this text is a link: "Sign in to Google to save your progress. Learn more". The form contains four text input fields, each with a label and a "Your answer" placeholder. The labels are "Name", "Email address", "Please take this space to tell us about the issues or challenges that affect your work, or the operations issues or challenges that you think are affecting the organization.", and "Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?". At the bottom of the form, there is a purple "Submit" button and a "Clear form" link.

- (2) Guidance on grouping or “clumping”:** Once you’ve received input from key stakeholders on the issues or challenges they’re facing, and/or on the issues or challenges they feel are important for the organization to address, you’ll likely be faced

with dozens of data points. At this point it may be useful to group them together depending on how they may be related. An example of this grouping is below

What you may hear from key stakeholders	How you may group these together into one issue or challenge
"It would be nice if we could receive direct deposits instead of paper checks"	Improve the payroll process to ensure accuracy and timeliness (expanding direct deposit if possible)
"I'd like to get paid on time – it's a bit frustrating that every once in a while it's late"	
"Last week my paycheck was missing 5 hours."	

(3) Survey for prioritization: After you've grouped the input you've received into a list of 10 to 15 issues or challenges (at most), you may consider using a survey to get input on the prioritization of those issues or challenges. The below survey is an example of one you may use to share with your "steering committee" ahead of meeting with them to discuss the results of the survey in order to reach consensus (or at least majority agreement) on the top issues or challenges on which to focus initially.

Prioritization survey

Thank you for helping with the process of prioritizing operations issues and challenges.

[Sign in to Google](#) to save your progress. [Learn more](#)

Below is a list of issues or challenges. Please review each one and evaluate it on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "Very low priority" and 5 being "Very high priority." You can give the same score to multiple issues or challenges.

When you are considering what score to give an issue or challenge, consider the overall "IMPACT" that would result from solving an issue or challenge, and its potential ripple effects throughout the organization.

Issue or challenge #1

- 1 - Very low priority
- 2 - Low priority
- 3 - Medium priority
- 4 - High priority
- 5 - Very high priority

Issue or challenge #2

- 1 - Very low priority
- 2 - Low priority
- 3 - Medium priority
- 4 - High priority
- 5 - Very high priority

Issue or challenge #3

- 1 - Very low priority
- 2 - Low priority
- 3 - Medium priority
- 4 - High priority
- 5 - Very high priority

[Submit](#) [Clear form](#)

Appendix F: Reflection questions on operations challenges

As you or any of your key stakeholders think through what operations issues or challenges your organization may be facing, you may find it useful to read through the below reflection questions to help generate ideas for where to focus. Note that REDF's Baseline Assessment framework may also be useful in reflecting on and identifying potential operations issues or challenges on which to focus (see [this appendix](#) for more on how the Baseline Assessment framework maps to the operations elements addressed in this playbook).

- **Procedures, Processes, and Policies:** Are processes and procedures written down somewhere, or do they instead exist “in people's heads”? Which processes are routine or regularly performed in the organization? Are there processes or procedures that are “burdensome” to anyone on the team (i.e., they take a lot of time, effort, or concentration, or the required procedures are confusing)? Are there processes or procedures that require a lot of rework because – for whatever reason – they're usually not completed correctly the first time?
- **Technology & Systems:** Are team members comfortable with the systems that are in place that support their work? Do systems that are in place work as they are expected? Are there frustrations, issues, or “glitches”? When there are glitches, what happens? Are there functions that you wish your current systems had that they don't currently? Are systems and systems access monitored and controlled to ensure security of data and reduce liability?
- **Communication & Training:** In what manner or method are important messages currently shared within the organization to team members? Are messaging channels, content, timing, and frequency appropriate for the audiences receiving them (i.e., are the people who need to receive the messages and understand them actually receiving and understanding them)? How are individuals trained when they first come into the organization? Are there new skills that team members can learn over time, and how do they learn those skills? How is an individual trained if and when their role changes?
- **Financial Management:** Does the leadership team (at the very least the CEO and CFO) know how much cash is in the bank, and how that amount may fluctuate throughout the month or year? Does the leadership team review, understand, and discuss financial reports that accurately reflect the financial status of the organization?¹³ Are accurate invoices sent to customers in a timely manner, and are those invoices paid accurately and in a timely manner? Are invoices sent to your organization paid accurately and in a timely manner? Are debts and other external financial obligations being serviced or addressed appropriately?

¹³ A helpful guide to understanding financial statements and why they are important can be found here: <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/how-to-read-financial-statements>

Appendix G: Example of “low-hanging fruit”

It can sometimes be difficult to determine what “low-hanging fruit” may be in the context of “Step Three” of the playbook. As described in the main body of the playbook, these are actions you can take or solutions you can implement that will take relatively limited effort but that will produce results. And – these don’t need to be *complete* solutions to an issue or challenge, rather it can also a part of the solution that is enough to give yourself and the team that good feeling that you got something done (and therefore keep the momentum going to keep getting things done).

In order to help you as you think through what may be “low-hanging fruit,” let me give a brief example:

“Just one click!”: I was working with a social enterprise to help them address a variety of operations challenges, and one of the first concerns that I heard from the leadership and management team was that invoicing was a real issue. There was a large backlog of unsent invoices (some that were a year old or more), and one of the organizational leaders said that what was particularly frustrating was that it didn’t seem that the scheduling system (where jobs and invoices were created) was “talking” correctly with their financial management system (where invoice status was tracked and monitored for payment and closure). In other words, the invoice records were supposed to be replicated from the scheduling system to the financial management system automatically and this wasn’t happening consistently, meaning that it wasn’t clear at a glance what the status of invoicing was for the organization (making it unclear what actions to take next). I could tell by the exasperation in this leader’s voice that it was a real frustration – something that, if I could figure out what was going on and how to solve it, it would really take a big weight off their shoulders. After a bit of digging, I discovered that there was a bit of a nuance to how the scheduling system worked – it wasn’t until you clicked the “Complete” button for a scheduled job in the scheduling system that it would replicate that job (and the corresponding invoice) to the financial management system. Once I discovered this, I shared it with the leadership and management team, and it was an easy item to message to the broader team – “just one click” on the “Complete” button and the system did the rest of the work. When I shared this with the leader who originally expressed this concern, they were relieved: “Wow! I never realized it would be so straightforward. I’m glad it wasn’t a more serious issue – what an easy fix!”

As you can see from the above example, a “low-hanging fruit” action can be something as simple as adjusting the configuration of a system or learning more about a feature that unlocks a system’s pre-programmed automation. It doesn’t have to take weeks or months – in an afternoon or a day or two, you can often find an action, solution, or part of a solution that will provide relief for a challenge and produce momentum to tackle more challenges as a team.

Appendix H: Template for operations improvement project (OIP) charter

As noted in the main body of the playbook, planning and preparation for an OIP is important, but it's equally important to strike the right balance between under- and over-preparing. Creating a charter is a great way to focus the planning and preparation effort. A charter helps to clearly define and communicate where a given OIP will be focused, the timeline for the effort, and what other organizational resources may be needed to be successful. Filling in the below template should put you on the path to successful execution of your OIP.

A downloadable template can be found [here](#) (be sure to download it, as this template can't be filled in unless you download it to your computer or add it to your own Google Drive)

Charter for Operations Improvement Project (OIP)	
Title:	Enter a simple title for this OIP Example: Incremental improvement to B2C invoicing process
Description of focus:	Use 3 to 5 sentences to describe where this OIP will be focused. This can include a statement of what problem has been observed, and also what the OIP may *not* be focused on. Example: We've noticed that there is a growing backlog of unsent B2C invoices for jobs completed. This OIP will be focused on understanding why this is occurring and take actions to address these causes (such as updates to the process, new training for individuals involved in the process, or adjustments to systems). This OIP will avoid a specific focus on B2B invoicing, but there may be outcomes of this OIP that also result in improvements to those processes.
When we'll know we're successful:	Ideally, this should be a tangible, measurable result that shows how this OIP had an impact on the organization. It's also OK to phrase this in a way that references other deliverables, or phrase it in a more qualitative fashion. In fact, I encourage you to add a bit of how it will "feel" for the organization and team to successfully address this issue – using the inspiration of a good future feeling can help with overall motivation =) Example: We'll know we're successful when a majority of our B2C invoices (<90%) are sent within 5 days of the job being completed. We will also be producing at least one short guide that can be used by anyone involved in the invoicing process to ensure B2C invoices are sent promptly and accurately. We'll also know we're successful when B2C invoicing is no longer a "stressor," is no longer something that we are concerned about during our weekly management meetings and is something that can be cause for celebration.
Timeline:	Include 3 to 7 milestones that will guide the team's efforts. This doesn't have to be at the detail of a project plan, but it should include enough information so that someone who picks this up can quickly understand what you're doing and where your efforts will be focused over time. Example: Feb 15, 2022: Target date to complete analysis of the root causes for why B2C invoices are getting "stuck." Mar 1, 2022: Target date to have 3 ways that we can address the root causes that we expect can produce results. Mar 17, 2022: OIP completed, along with short guide produced that can be used by anyone involved in the process to ensure B2C invoices are sent promptly and accurately.
People involved in this OIP:	Include a list of individuals who will need to be involved in this OIP in some form. If possible, include a short description of what their role will be. Julia: Leader for this OIP Marco: Involved in the day-to-day monitoring of B2C invoices, so will be included in discussions on what can be done to improve the process.

Key Stakeholder Signatures: An important step in completing a charter, the act of signing something signals commitment and understanding. I encourage you to seek signatures of 2-4 key stakeholders who should know about and be supportive of this OIP. Your signature, along with those listed above, should be the minimum signatures here.

The below signed understand this OIP charter and are supportive of the overall effort and the people involved:

Name & Signature

Name & Signature

Name & Signature

Name & Signature

Appendix I: Examples of operations improvement projects (OIPs)

In order to give you a better sense for what an operations improvement project (OIP) *might* look like at your organization, I've provided a few examples below. As you read through these OIP examples, you'll notice how – in some way – they all involve changes to “Procedures, Processes, and Policies.” Indeed, as you work through the steps of this playbook and continue your role as the operations leader at the ESE, you'll notice that almost every operations improvement effort ultimately results in a change or update to a procedure, process, and/or policy. This is natural, as procedures, processes, and policies underly everything that happens at an organization – after all, it's how things get done! As you continue your own role, be mindful of how any changes to systems or adjustments to internal communications (or any other operational change) will – in almost every instance – mean a change to a procedure, process, or policy.

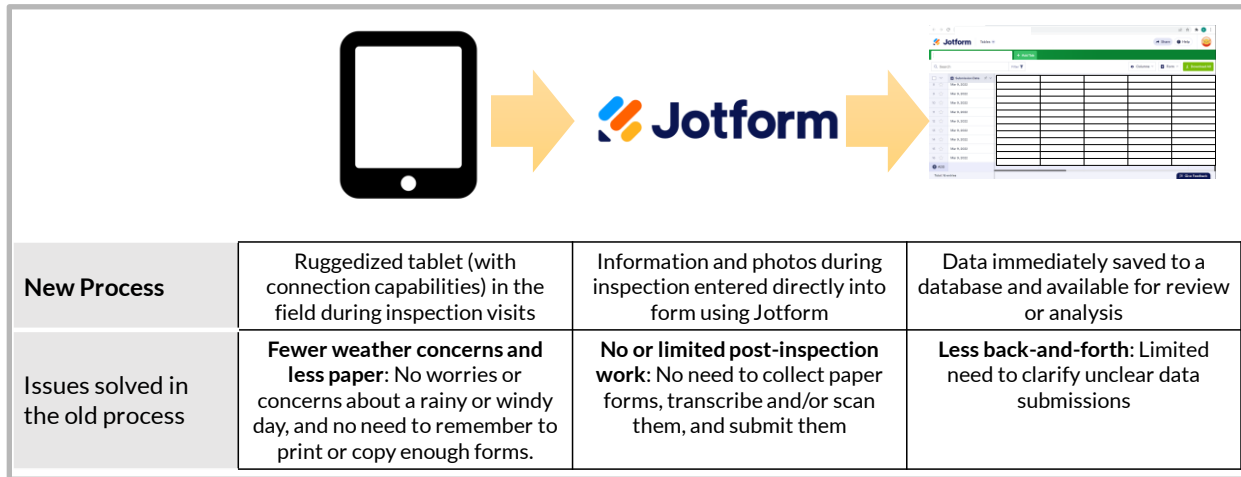
Operations improvement project (OIP) examples:

Example One – Anticipating a backlog and addressing it with new process & technology:

For one social enterprise, I was responsible for managing a partnership with a local nonprofit as part of a citywide initiative to monitor and maintain large [green infrastructure](#) (GI) installations throughout the city. Our small social enterprise would be tasked with making site visits to more than a hundred GI installations, conducting up to three inspections per site (so – over three hundred inspections total), recording the inspection reports by paper and pen, and then returning to the office to transcribe and transmit those reports to the local nonprofit (who was the program administrator). After the very first set of inspections, I could see that using a “paper and pen” inspection reporting solution for the rest of the inspections would create *enormous* amounts of work for everyone involved in the process and may also lead to frequent errors or omitted data (try completing a report in the wind and rain using paper and pen – the paper would likely tear, or the pen would smudge or not write at all!). A new process would not only eliminate paper and pen but would also eliminate the need to return to the office before submitting a report – instead we'd be able to complete reports and submit them straight from the field. I explored a combination of technologies that would *support the new process* and developed and tested a new solution (see graphic below). This new solution worked incredibly well – our social enterprise team members were able to complete and submit reports from the field, and the nonprofit partner was able to quickly collect the reports and generate aggregate reports of their own to the city. Now – the first version of this process was not perfect, but it was a step in the right direction. In order to ensure that the process would be efficiently run and improved over time, I identified a “process owner” who could oversee and manage the process, to include making any needed adjustments over time (for example, the format of the forms we used in “Jotform”¹⁴ required some adjustments in order to make the in-field

¹⁴ Note that this is not an endorsement of Jotform – it's a good solution that may be a good fit depending on the process challenge you're facing (and there may be other solutions that are a better fit). You can learn more about Jotform [here](#).

experience during inspections as efficient as possible). This new process (and the combination of technologies to support it) were so immediately appealing that the city ended up providing additional investment to the program in order to make it the standard for all organizations doing GI installation inspections and maintenance.



Example Two – Improving internal messaging capabilities: In one instance I was working with a social enterprise that was going through an exciting hiring phase – joyful news for an ESE! However, this also meant that a number of processes would likely start to show “stress fractures” – in other words, older processes that worked for the smaller organization would likely start failing or causing frustration for team members as the organization got bigger. I quickly noticed that there was one process – internal messaging to team members – that was managed by one person (the operations manager) via their mobile phone. This person would get text messages (the primary form of communication with the broader team) from supervisors and team members every few minutes each workday (and sometimes on weekends), which would distract the operations manager from their many other jobs and tasks. The operations manager would then either have to ignore the messages from team members, delay their other jobs and tasks, or regularly work 10+ hour days in order to do everything (this operations manager was particularly dedicated, so they inevitably chose the latter). The obvious outcome if nothing changed was that this operations manager would get burned out. What was needed was a new process and a new way of communicating with the broader team. We decided that centralizing communication was important (in other words, having all text messages come to one place), but having a way for multiple managers to see or respond to messages would also be important. What’s more, we had to find a way to “free” the operations manager from having to receive (and therefore feeling obligated to respond to) every message. Now that we had the concept for the new *process* in mind, we would need to find the *technology or system* that was affordable, that had the needed functions, and that was usable for all team members. After a bit of research, to include testing and trialing multiple systems, I found

that the Google Voice business phone system would be a good fit.¹⁵ I introduced the idea to the leadership team and they were on board – the operations manager especially was looking forward to fewer distractions throughout the day. We set up a Google Voice account, added the phone numbers for all team members to it, and instructed all team members via text to save that number as the new primary number for *any* questions or concerns. On the back end, any manager with the login could view the text messages from team members on their computer and respond to them if needed. Immediately there was a noticeable impact – the operations manager received fewer texts throughout the day, they were able to focus on and complete other tasks, and they actually got to go home at a reasonable hour every day.

¹⁵ Once again, not an endorsement, but Google Voice may be a good fit for certain situations. You can learn more [here](#).

Appendix J: Quick guide to process improvement and root cause analysis

You will likely find yourself in some situation where you're faced specifically with improving a process to increase its accuracy (i.e., reducing the number of errors or amount of rework needed) or increasing its speed. The below quick guide to process improvement is a very high-level approach to assessing and analyzing processes, and also includes a common approach to "root cause analysis" wherein you do a deep dive on what may be causing any one of the major problems in a process (i.e., problems that are affecting the accuracy or speed of the process).

- (1) **Define the overall process:** What is the main input to the process (i.e., what "starts" or "triggers" the process)? What is the main output of the process (i.e., when do you know the process is done or completed)? How many "outputs" result (or are supposed to result) over a given time period (perhaps a day, week, or month)?
- (2) **Identify who's involved in the process:** What individuals (team members, managers, others) are involved in the process in any way? These may be individuals executing the steps, or they may be individuals making decisions or providing guidance during the process
- (3) **Dive deeper into the process:** What are the major steps in the process? Who does what? What technology or systems are involved in each step? You may find it helpful to speak with individuals involved in the process. Ask them where the "backlog" is happening – this is where work is piling up. Where are there "frustrations" or "friction"? Do the people involved in the process have ideas for how to improve it?
- (4) **Do root cause analysis:** By this point you may have heard where the major issues, problems, or "frustrations" are in the process. It's likely that there is a main root cause (or only a few root causes) of these problems. "Root cause analysis" is how you discover those causes so that you can make a change that will be meaningful to process improvement. One way to do root cause analysis is with the "5 why's approach" where you ask "why" five times in order to discover the root cause of a challenge or problem. An example will illustrate how this can be useful:

<p>Main problem that you've identified in the inventory process:</p> <p>"We never have the right items in the warehouse in order to do the weekly deep clean janitorial work."</p>	<p>→Ask yourself (or the team):</p> <p>Why? (see next line)</p>
<p>"Because the right items don't always arrive when there's a shipment."</p>	<p>→Ask yourself (or the team):</p> <p>Why? (see next line)</p>
<p>"Because the person doing the ordering doesn't know what to order for us."</p>	<p>→Ask yourself (or the team):</p> <p>Why? (see next line)</p>

<p>“Because we don’t really communicate that to them.”</p>	<p>→Ask yourself (or the team): Why? (see next line)</p>
<p>“Because we don’t know how to communicate that to them.”</p>	<p>→Ask yourself (or the team): Why? (see next line)</p>
<p>“Because we don’t want to bother them to ask how we should communicate that to them.”</p>	<p>After asking 5 “Why’s” you may have found a root cause that is worth addressing. In this case, there may be a trust or communication barrier between the individuals and teams doing the janitorial work and the individual doing the ordering. Using this as a starting point for making a change to the process will likely put you on the path to improving the output of this process (which is the correct items being available in inventory).</p>

- (5) **Identify what can be changed:** You may be limited in budget or time or other resources to make sweeping changes to the process. Identify what can be changed or updated to address any root causes that you’ve uncovered. Using the example from above, an idea for what could be changed may include a scheduled weekly phone call between the person doing the ordering and a supervisor or other representative from the team doing the janitorial work.
- (6) **Work with a process owner to make the change:** There should be an “owner” of the process identified in order for any process update or change to “stick.” In the example above, this may in fact be the person doing the ordering. Work with that person in a collaborative fashion to agree to and make the change or update that is feasible.
- (7) **Communicate the change:** There are several ways to communicate that a process has been changed or updated. It’s important that anyone involved in the process knows that there are new or different steps or activities. One way to do so is with process map and description of steps like the one you can find [here](#). Process maps are quick ways to illustrate how a process is intended to work. Be sure to distribute the process map to anyone involved in the process so that they can review it and ask questions if needed.
- (8) **Monitor the change:** After a change has been made to a process, you’ll likely have to keep an eye on the process for a while to ensure the change “sticks” and that everyone involved in the process understands their role in the new or updated process.

Appendix K: Basic 7-day scheduling tool

As noted in the introduction of this playbook, choosing the right technology or system to support a process includes determining what combination of tools are the best fit for the individuals or team that will be using it. The basic scheduling tool that you can find [here](#) is a spreadsheet tool that may be a good fit for your team and your process if all you need is a tool that helps you determine how to allocate resources on a job-by-job (or site-by-site) basis and then communicate those job or site assignments via email attachment or via printed and physically posted schedule. This tool is *primarily* useful in allocating resources and seeing at a glance what the assignments are by team member or by job. This tool can be used in combination with other internal communication or job assignment tools.

Setting up the tool

1. Use the above link to open the scheduling tool, and download it to your Google Drive or as an Excel file
2. On the “Mgmt Dashboard” tab, enter the names of the team members for whom you need to schedule.
3. On the “Lists” tab, review the list of times and the list of dates. Adjust the list of times to ensure it reflects the full range and intervals of times that a shift can start or end. Adjust the list of dates to ensure the list includes all dates on which the 7-day schedule will *start*.
4. For each “Job / Site” tab, change the name of the job or site in cell B2. In cell J4, change this number to the length of the unpaid break for each shift (if any). If this is not applicable, you can simply delete the number as well as the content of the cells that say “All shifts include a” and “hour unpaid break.” Finally, if you like, change the name of the tab to something similar to what you put in cell B2.

Updating the schedule

1. When you are ready to update the schedule, start on the “Mgmt Dashboard” tab. Update cell E6 to select the date for the first day of the 7-day schedule.
2. On each job / site tab, select the drop-down in cells B8 through B22 to enter each team member’s name who will be scheduled at that job / site for that week. On the same tab, continue to use the drop downs to select the start and end time for each day that each team member is assigned to that job / site.
3. After you have completed Step 2 for each job / site tab, return to the “Mgmt Dashboard” tab. Scroll to the very bottom of the sheet to see the “Sheet quality checks.” If all cells are green, then the sheet hasn’t found any errors. If you see a red cell with “Error,” this is what each error could mean:
 - a. An error in “Management dashboard date” – this error appears if the date you’ve entered in cell E6 appears to be too far in the future or in the past. It simply alerts you to the possibility that the schedule start date is not correct. Revisit what you have entered in cell E6 to ensure it’s the correct date (and, if so, you can ignore this error message)

- b. An error in any of the job / site tabs – this error appears if one of two things have occurred on that job / site tab (1) you’ve entered a shift start time without entering a shift end time or (2) the shift end time is *before* the shift start time. Revisit the job / site tab showing the error in order to find and correct the error.
4. On the “Mgmt Dashboard” tab, review all of the weekly total hours for all team members and job-by-job (or site-by-site). Do all of those total hours look accurate? Is there anything that doesn’t look right? If so, revisit the job / site tab where you think there is an incorrect entry and update it accordingly. (Note: The cell with weekly totals for each team member automatically highlight in yellow if the hours exceed 40, as this is often the legal threshold¹⁶ for being obligated to pay overtime to hourly employees. This may be warranted, but it’s important at a management level to be aware of who is working overtime and to ensure that overtime is pre-authorized and within the budget of the organization.)

Distributing the schedule

1. There are a few ways of distributing the schedule to team members. Before distributing the schedule, however, it is advisable to “hide” columns Q through AA in each job / site tab, as this includes information that isn’t needed by team members and may cause confusion when the schedule is distributed (you can keep these columns hidden, as they simply do automatic calculations in each sheet and don’t include cells that require any edits on your part).
2. Use one of the below methods to distribute the schedule (all of the below instructions assume you are using/editing the sheet in Google Drive):
 - a. Send it as a viewable link to the Google Drive sheet: Click the button that says “Share” in the upper-righthand corner. On the screen that pops up, where it says “General Access,” select “Anyone with link” and then “Viewer” (this is very important, as giving team members “Edit” access might result in someone accidentally changing or deleting information). Click “Done.” Select the specific tab that you want to share, highlight the URL in the navigation bar at the top of your screen, and copy it. This link can now be sent to team members and, when they open it, they will be immediately brought to the job / site tab whose URL you copied.
 - b. Send it as an attached PDF and/or print it for posting physically: Click on “File” in the upper-lefthand corner. Select “Download” and “PDF.” On the next screen that pops up, where it says “Export” select “Workbook,” and then where it says “Selection,” select the sheets that you want to make into a PDF. Click “Apply.” Select “Export” in the upper-righthand corner. The file will download (usually into your “Downloads” folder). You can then either attach the file to an email and/or print it for posting on a bulletin board (or somewhere else that your team members will be able to see it).

¹⁶ Be sure to review and understand the applicable federal, state, and local laws regarding overtime

- c. Use the “print screen” method to take a screenshot of the schedule, and then paste it into emails or other messages to team members. On the Google Drive sheet, you can zoom into about 80% (for a 16:9 aspect ratio screen), take a screenshot, then crop that screenshot as needed before distributing the schedule.

Appendix L: More about the author of this playbook



Greg Payne is the President and Principal Consultant at Emerging Market Enterprises (EME). At EME, Greg supports impact enterprises, minority-owned businesses, and entrepreneurship ecosystem builders in the US and Latin America as these organizations face challenges related to operations & financial management, market strategy, and access to capital. Greg has over fifteen years of consulting and operational experience in the private, public, and non-profit sectors, and is experienced in the fields of strategy, market evaluation, operations improvement, change management, and impact investing. Greg holds an MBA with a concentration in Finance and Social Entrepreneurship from Duke University and is fluent in Spanish.

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