

# **Public service delivery – What matters for successful implementation and what can policy leaders do?**

**Landry Signé**





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## Abstract

Why do policy implementation and public service delivery too often fail to achieve the goals initially formulated by policy leaders, and how to fix it? What matters for successful implementation and what can policy leaders do? In a previous paper, we proposed a synthesis of the study of policy implementation and the cause of policy failure. This policy paper explains the key factors leading to policy success, and provides policymakers with actionable solutions to help formulate and implement public policies successfully and deliver services to the level of expectations of citizens.



# Public service delivery – What matters for successful implementation and what can policy leaders do?

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

While it is evident that there are a plethora of avenues for increasing the propensity for successfully implementing an intervention, there are broad themes that the literature agrees upon. After evaluating and synthesizing twenty-seven studies, D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman (2012, 9) identified fourteen steps to quality implementation—but three stood out with disproportionately high consensus across the field. The most important foci for researchers are process evaluation (96% agreement), obtaining buy – in from stakeholders and the community (92% agreement), and effective pre-innovation staff training (88% agreement).

A successful implementation will master the delivery of core components—what Wandersman et al. (2008, 175) describe as the “critical features of an intervention’s intent and design... thought to be responsible for its effectiveness... [that] must be implemented with fidelity to the original program design.”

## 2. What matters for successful implementation?

### 2.1. Knowledge

To correct for ambiguities in policy design, whether or intentional or unintentional, the implementers must be given freedom to adapt and empowered with the knowledge on how best to do so. The role of the street-level bureaucrat or policy implementer is that of interpretation—recognizing a particular intervention and/or goal and responding in a particular way (Winter 2011, 20). In this case the notion of “limited resources” does not exclusively refer to funding support (D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012, 8). The clarity of information about a specific intervention should be user-friendly and accessible to implementers, not sequestered in scientific papers (Wandersman et al. 2008, 175). When analyzing why fisheries engage in various management practices, Sandström (2011, 424) found that variance was often a result of differences in knowledge that were exercised due to a lack of clarity in policy goals. Differences in perspective can drastically shape outcomes. The conception of roles held by implementers at the bottom can differ substantially from the views of those who formulated the roles (Zhan, Lo, and Tang 2014). Moreover, deficiencies in knowledge are difficult to identify. Principals are further removed from action, and are thus less likely to spot knowledge gaps (Winter 2011, 15).

Often the assumptions held by policy designers carry into the implementation process.

However, Winter (2011, 19) has noted that “target groups have also important roles in relation to implementation outcomes. Most public policies aim at changing the problematic behaviours of—or conditions for—citizens or firms by either regulating their behaviours or providing services for them that

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will help them do better. Most policies build on an explicit—or often implicit—causal theory on how these behaviours and conditions can be changed by public intervention. However, as indicated above these causal theories are not always valid. Unfortunately, political science research has not paid much attention to the outcomes of public policies and the mechanisms that affect how citizens and firms respond to public policies and the way in which they are implemented. Some attention to these issues has been paid in regulation research in the borderline between sociology, economics, psychology, and political science. While developed for regulatory policies, the theorizing seems to have some relevance for social policies as well.”

## 2.2. Training

Specific, specialized, and repetitive training is necessary to achieve successful implementation (Wandersman and Florin 2003; Altman 1995; Wandersman et al. 2008; Fixsen et al. 2005). From a theoretical perspective, training is an instrumental process that achieves the terminal goal of increasing knowledge. Winter (2011) notes that the response to implementation is dictated by a variety of factors: “This first includes knowledge of the rules, which may be one of the most important factors in explaining how citizens and firms respond.... Second, favourable outcomes also depend on whether people know how to translate rules into concrete action. Farmers may know the agro-environmental rules but may not know what a particular rule implies for their farming practices. Financial capacity and resilience can also be important—not least for firms in regulatory policies” (Winter 2011, 20).

One meta-analysis found that training prior to the adoption of advanced manufacturing innovations was found to increase the likelihood of successful implementation, and that training can help create a positive climate and boost receptiveness (P. W. Meyers, Sivakumar, and Nakata 1999).

## 2.3. Evaluation

There is general consensus among scholars that evaluation is a necessary component of the policy implementation process. A meta-analysis of twenty-seven frameworks for implementation found that a full 96% of studies reviewed emphasized the necessity of evaluating processes (D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012, 8–9). An ideal implementation process will continuously change and develop in response to changing context and new inputs and outputs.

There are a variety of variables that can be used to monitor the degree to which a particular implementation is succeeding or failing. For example, Domitrovich et al. (2008, 11) suggest that implementation of preventative programs can be measured by fidelity, dosage, and quality through multiple metrics. Durlak and DuPre (2008, 331) remark that measurement can occur through independent behavioral observations and self – reports. Durlack and DuPre (2008: 329) note that “there are eight different aspects to implementation, and Dane and Schneider (1998) described five of these. (1) There is fidelity, which is the extent to which the innovation corresponds to the originally intended program (aka adherence, compliance, integrity, faithful replication). (2) There is dosage, which refers to how much of the original program has been delivered (quantity, intervention strength). (3) Quality refers to how well different program components have been conducted (e.g., are the main program elements delivered clearly and correctly?). (4) Participant responsiveness refers to the degree to which the program stimulates the interest or holds the attention of participants (e.g., are students attentive during program lessons?). (5) Program differentiation involves the extent to which a program’s theory and practices can be distinguished from other programs (program uniqueness). The latter two aspects of implementation have not received much research attention, and are not evaluated here, but see Hogue et al. (2005), and Hansen and McNeal (1999) for examples.... There are

three additional aspects of implementation worthy of attention. These include (6) the monitoring of control/ comparison conditions, which involves describing the nature and amount of services received by members of these groups (treatment contamination, usual care, alternative services). (7) Program reach (participation rates, program scope) refers to the rate of involvement and representativeness of program participants. Finally, there is adaptation, (8) which refers to changes made in the original program during implementation (program modification, reinvention).”

The act of evaluation has been demonstrated to influence outcomes:

There are five meta-analyses containing information on the impact of implementation on outcomes. The primary studies in these reviews vary in terms of how they report on implementation. For example, in a review of 59 mentoring studies, DuBois et al. (2002) found programs that monitored implementation obtained effect sizes three times larger than programs that reported no monitoring (mean effects of 0.18 vs. 0.06, respectively). (Durlak and DuPre 2008, 330)

## 2.4. Buy-in

### 2.4.1. Ensure Community Support and Involvement

Community – level factors are extremely important to achieving implementation, particularly if an intervention is to be deployed in a community-centric context. In a meta-analysis of twenty-seven relevant studies on implementation that contained frameworks or models, 92% cited community context as a relevant factor, the strongest level of agreement found after support for process evaluation (96%) (D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012, 8). For example Durlak and DuPre (2008, 336) describe the capacity or readiness of a community as exercised through community coalitions as positively correlated with successful implementations. The community in question must find the intervention credible, sustainable, and led by an active champion (Elliott and Mihalic 2004; Flaspohler et al. 2008, 188). Standards developed for the implementation of reading programs in schools included achieving widespread acceptance and commitment to the program, establishing a facilitator among efforts to ensure appropriate professional development, and ensuring strong level of administrative leadership (Denton, Vaughn, and Fletcher 2003; Fixsen et al. 2005, 9). Specifically, D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman (2012, 7-9) recommend obtaining high levels of support from administrators, particularly to reinforce the notion that an intervention is necessary. They also recommend taking steps to ensure alignment of the intervention with the mission and values of the organization, identifying means to create incentives to use the innovation, and to identify “champions” who will advocate for use.

### 2.4.2. Engage in Vertical Collaboration

Various authors note the importance of interventions being crafted with participation from both policy formulators and policy implementers (Matland 1995; Zhan, Lo, and Tang 2014; May 2012, 286; Veronesi and Keasey 2015, 563), but there is little data on what strategies work (Fixsen et al. 2005, 8; Winter 2011, 8). D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman (2012) note the necessity for conversations with both leadership and front-line implementers about how implementation can be adapted to particular circumstances. In the context of implementing innovations for industrial processes, the most relevant factor in successful implementation was identified as frequent collaboration between buyer and seller (P. W. Meyers, Sivakumar, and Nakata 1999, 301), which can be extrapolated more broadly to service providers and service receivers. Highly centralized intervention design that forgoes consultation with implementers will suffer, since implementation of a particular intervention often occurs in a decentralized manner. A meta-analysis

of twenty-three studies concluded that there was a significant negative association between centralized decision-making and levels of organizational innovation (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, 605), but some authors indicate that centralization may reduce ambiguity and conflict (P. W. Meyers, Sivakumar, and Nakata 1999, 299). For example, in China, top-down environmental reforms were stymied by a lack of a strong support coalition comprising the environmental protection boards relied upon for actual implementation (Zhan, Lo, and Tang 2014, 1029–30).

### **2.4.3. Engage in Horizontal Collaboration**

For Head and Alford (2013, 15) “the presence of collaborative relationships is likely to enhance the understanding and addressing of those wicked problems where there are multiple parties with differential knowledge, interests, or values. This is one form of what Huxham and Vangen (2005) called ‘collaborative advantage’, a term that includes, inter alia, a role for collaboration in tackling the kinds of problems we normally regard as ‘wicked’ and for which there is no other way, such as poverty, crime, or drug abuse. Where collaboration is operating effectively (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Head, 2008a), it can help in addressing wicked problems in three ways.” In this sense, collaboration increases the understanding of the problem.

Head and Alford (2013, 15) have noted a crucial characteristic of collaboration that assists in dealing with problems: “First, the presence of functioning cooperative networks increases the likelihood that the nature of the problem and its underlying causes can be better,” if not entirely, understood (North, 2000; Padilla & Daigle, 1998). This manifests itself as a shared understanding of the problems and overarching purposes (Bentrup, 2001; Pahl-Wostl & Hare, 2004). This not only arises in part from a shared ownership of the deliberative process (Gunton & Day, 2003; Tett, Crowther, & O’Hara, 2003) but also arises from the involvement of a wider array of actors, offering more diverse insights into why a situation has arisen.

### **2.4.4. Collaboration helps move implementation along**

The third way in which effective collaboration helps in addressing problems is that “it facilitates the implementation of solutions, not only because the parties are more likely to have agreed on the next steps but also because it potentially enables shared contributions, coordinated actions, and mutual adjustments among them as problems arise in putting the agreed solution into practice (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004; Mandell, 2001), enhanced by bestowing autonomy and hence flexibility on organizational representatives (Bardach, 1998)” (Head and Alford 2013, 16).

## **2.5. Commitment**

A demonstrable commitment of resources from both implementers and administrators is necessary to bolster an intervention for successful implementation (Elliott and Mihalic 2004; Flaspohler et al. 2008). The perception of sustainability and organizational commitment translates into greater support from all implementers. Moreover, when levels of commitment are high, ambiguity (e.g., will this program still be around in x years?) is reduced (P. W. Meyers, Sivakumar, and Nakata 1999, 298). The key questions to consider include who will be responsible for leading others to implement the program, how incentives can be used to demonstrate the importance of the intervention, and how resistance can be minimized (D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012, 8). Supporters should be active and outnumber opponents in order to ensure a long-term adoption of an intervention (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, 608). In particular, a demonstrable commitment should be most visible and routine at the upper levels of the administrative hierarchy, particularly when implementation faces challengers (P. W. Meyers, Sivakumar, and Nakata 1999, 300).

## 2.6. Compatibility

### 2.6.1. Organizational Fit

Not all organizations can equally implement a particular innovation. Ensuring that potential interventions are reviewed for alignment with the purpose, mission, and resources of the organization and the targeted populations is essential (Fixsen et al. 2005). There is general agreement that an intervention must be well received by the group relied upon to accept an innovation and implement it successfully (Fixsen et al. 2005; Flaspohler et al. 2008, 188). In a meta-analysis of implementation literature conducted by (D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012), the identification of specific reasons for adopting a particular intervention appeared in more than half of implementation models considered. Specifically, the implementation of an intervention should reflect the contextual factors of the organization or implementers. For example, in a meta-analysis of twenty-seven studies on policy implementation frameworks, more than half included components that sought to identify whether an intervention was necessary (i.e., whether there was a real problem), appropriate for the context (i.e., whether the intervention would solve the problem), and whether the organization had necessary resources to succeed (i.e., whether we should do this and whether we are ready) (D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012, 8–9). Implementations that conduct such assessments are more likely to find that the innovation is successfully adopted (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, 608). Proper fit translates into success in a variety of ways—(Durlak and DuPre 2008, 336) note that the perception of proper fit leads to greater self-efficacy among implementers and a greater likelihood for implementers to stay true to the program’s components. The concept of adaptability should not be limited exclusively to adapting a particular innovation, but extended to adapting the organization (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, 607–08).

There is little evidence regarding how specific characteristics of organizations influence their ability to implement interventions. According to Winter (2011, 18), “unfortunately, the research evidence on how different organizational arrangements contributes to implementation success or failure is rather modest. For example, we have very little evidence on the effectiveness or efficiency of using federal or state government field offices, local governments, nonprofit organization, or private firms for delivering public services.”

### 2.6.2. Adaptability

Programs must be adaptable in order to be implemented successfully (Durlak and DuPre 2008, 336–37). As mentioned elsewhere in this brief, considering community context, organizational readiness, and targeted groups are essential to ensure an innovation is appropriate. The implementation of an intervention will rarely, if ever, be replicated identically in all cases. For example, a program that addresses domestic violence and sexual assault on college campuses might need to be adapted substantially depending on the characteristics of the targeted group, e.g., whether the campus comprises primary residential students or commuter students. Durlak and DuPre (2008, 331) remark that achieving perfect implementation is unrealistic and that few studies have reached levels of fidelity greater than 80%. A meta-analysis of twenty-seven implementation frameworks found that more than three-quarters of them noted the importance of adaptability to success (D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012, 8–9), and the literature consistently recognizes that allowing for adaptability leads to better programs (Durlak and DuPre 2008, 338).

## 2.7. Leadership

### 2.7.1. Implementation Teams

Implementation of an intervention nearly always relies upon the work and collaboration of numerous individuals. A structure for implementation should be developed by a team of individuals who have the knowledge and experience to address challenges that may occur (Fixsen et al. 2005; D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012). The development of “champions,” or individuals who take the lead in building support for an intervention, is considered necessary by many authors. These individuals can help to reduce barriers to a successful implementation, such as ensuring the ability of an implementation team to operate autonomously and free from bureaucracy, or facilitating coalitions of leaders across multiple departments or entities (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, 603).

### 2.7.2. Enabling service-deliverers

Some authors heavily emphasize standardization as a necessity for successful implementation (Domitrovich et al. 2008), but research consistently underscores the necessity for discretion and adaptability on the part of service deliverers. Lipsky (1980) identifies the availability of discretion as a key factor for successful implementation among street-level bureaucrats. On balance, policies that enable implementers to have greater discretion are more favourable, although some have argued that discretion among implementers can enable them to pursue their own private goals, rather than that of the policy. There is the potential that greater discretion enables implementers to engage in discrimination, or to treat certain cases differently, eroding the intent of democratic policy processes (Tummers and Bekkers 2014, 530; Riccucci 2005, 103; Zhan, Lo, and Tang 2014, 1009; Maynard-Moody, Musheno, and Palumbo 1990), particularly when resources are constrained (D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012, 8). However, from the bottom-up perspective, building in room for discretion is an essential component of a successful implementation strategy, because it enables prioritization of certain rules in complex contexts. For example, (Tummers and Bekkers 2014, 531–32) hypothesize that more discretion leads to “positive influence... [on] experienced client meaningfulness” and a “positive... and direct influence on willingness to implement the policy.” In any case, it is extremely unlikely that all ambiguity in a policy can be eliminated, so some degree of interpretation will always be required by the implementer (M. Meyers and Nielsen 2012, 308, 311).

## 3. What can policy leaders do?

### 3.1. Reconsider Policy Design

Alternative models for creating public policy for issues that seem intractable already exist. Head and Alford (2013) first discuss the approach of Schon and Rein (1994), stating that they “advanced an approach founded in what they called ‘frame reflection.’ They argued that there are endemic problems in social policy that are not amenable to definitive solution either by authoritative determination (e.g., regulation) or through appeals to scientific knowledge. Intractable disputes, according to Schon and Rein, are likely to be grounded in different ‘frames’ and value perspectives rather than in disagreements about scientifically verified knowledge.... According to Schon and Rein, an alternative approach is to construct a meta-frame that builds on the conflicting frames of reference deployed by key actors. Depending on the scale of the issue, it may be feasible for policy designers to involve the antagonists themselves in constructing a shared narrative that recognizes multiple voices, teases out the implications of these value preferences, and seeks to resolve conflicts.... This activity is partly analytical and partly discursive—stakeholders are confronted with the responsibility for working through the implications of a more coherent approach. There may also

be an important contributing role for researchers and policy analysts by delineating the factors shaping a complex situation, mapping the complex patterns of causality at work, and calibrating the likely effects of new interventions or programs. In some cases, the analytical task may be assisted by deeply involving nongovernment stakeholders who have expertise in delivering services and in evaluating performance.”

Evidence is inconclusive as to whether accounting for (and attempting to minimize) variables like ambiguity in the policy design process, as a general rule, will lead to a successful implementation:

May (1993) has empirically investigated the influence of mandate design upon implementation efforts in state-level land-use and development management. Considering goal clarity as an indicator for statutory coherence overall, he found that a high degree of the latter is not a necessary condition for strong implementation efforts. (Hupe 2011, 72)

### 3.2. Re-evaluate management structures

Management structures should focus on more than increasing collaboration and incorporate broader elements that empower individuals from bottom to top. Head and Alford (2013) have stated that “Public managers and researchers have been actively considering a range of strategies and processes to tackle these problems. Perhaps most widespread is some form of collaborative or networked management, wherein managers work across boundaries with others who have relevant knowledge and a stake in the complex issue they are grappling with (Weber & Khademian, 2008). In our view, this widespread focus on ‘collaboration’ as a process solution to wicked problems is important but requires other measures.”

Additionally, Hupe (2011: 74) notes, “Not only the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats but also the actions of their managers matter for performance. Meier and O’Toole (2007) add, in respect of the latter, that this impact is often non-linear, on the basis of a review of more than twenty-five studies within the research agenda they launched in 1999 (O’Toole and Meier, 1999). Seeking parsimony they have formulated a set of hypotheses on expected relations between four variable clusters: performance, management, stability, and the environment. They conclude (2007) that managerial networking and its impact on performance is contingent on an organization’s environment. In particular, managerial networking seems to matter more in structural networks. The relationship between management and performance appears to be mediated by managerial quality, in the sense that skilful managers at the top of an organization are able to avoid diminishing returns by economizing on their investment in external interactions” (Hicklin, O’Toole and Meier, 2008: 269 – 70).

“Hierarchy matters, but it alone cannot explain empirical variation in implementation results. If there is anything the study of Pressman and Wildavsky has drawn attention to, it is the fact that public policy implementation does not take place in a normative vacuum. The multiple ways in which the implementation of a policy like the employment programme in Oakland is grounded in the institutions of the modern state made us speak of the thickness of hierarchy. Empirically, next, all is open. What has been identified as the multi-layer problem in implementation research has two major dimensions. First, the legitimacy of the action observed is a matter of normative judgment. Each of these two, observation and judgment, deserves to be addressed distinctively. Secondly, the location of the implementation part of a policy process in a given (macro-) system of vertical public administration is a matter of theoretical reflection, conceptualisation, operationalisation, and empirical observation. Presupposing different parts of governance as exclusively located on certain layers may hinder an open empirical analysis of what actually happens and why. The same goes for a priori assuming, on normative grounds, a literal congruence between them.” (Hupe 2011, 77)

One way better to address implementation challenges is to restructure adaptively. In this sense, Head and Alford (2013) argue that “organizations need to be able to assemble and reassemble project teams as problems emerge, progress, and come to some sort of resolution. Some illuminating examples of this have been organization structures adopted by the devolved Scottish government, which has structured all of its activities around six broad objectives and various outcomes (Scottish National Government, 2012), and the Dutch civil service, where two program ministries have been established, each responsible for broad outcomes, such as the integration of immigrants into the society, and each required to draw, with the help of a big budget, on other ministries for capabilities as required (Karre, van Twist, Alford, & van der Steen, 2012).”

“New strategic approaches would call for a more sophisticated or nuanced approach to performance measurement and program evaluation (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, & Halligan, 2010). Typically, this should focus more on the results end of the program logic, because this allows more flexibility concerning the processes by which outcomes are achieved, but it should also recognize two other things: (a) the complex feedback loops permeating these processes, and (b) the long lead times often required to address wicked problems, through greater focus on evaluating intermediate and precursor steps.” (Head and Alford 2013)

## **4. Conclusion**

This policy note serves as a query into the factors that make implementation of policies successful or not, as well as a discussion of what policy leaders need to do in order to make policies successful. We have demonstrated that the successful implementation of policy depends not only on full understanding of the policy by all parties involved, but also on appropriate evaluation, commitment, collaboration (both horizontal and vertical), and leadership.

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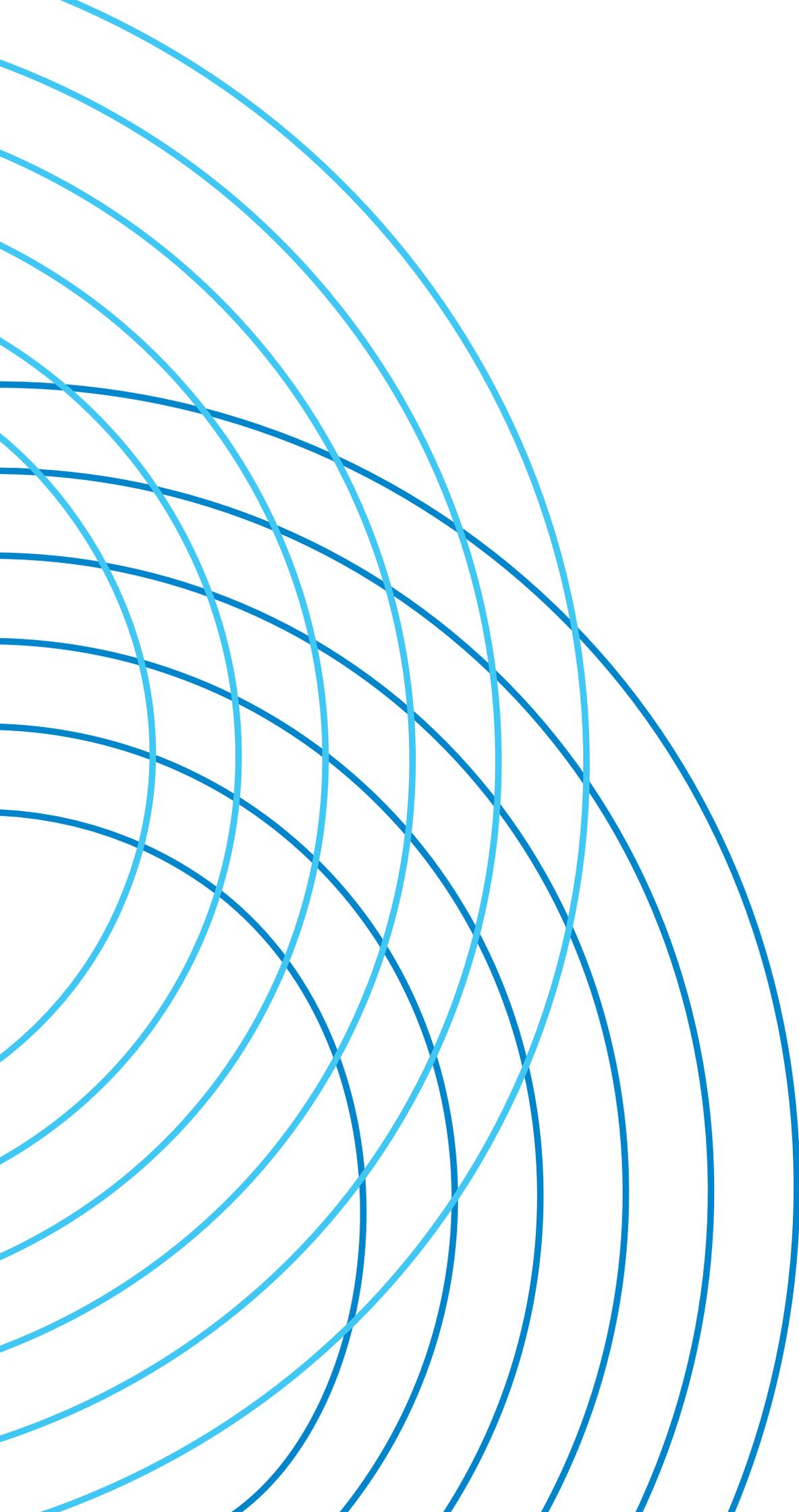
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