



Institutionalizing Rapid Cycle Evaluation: Strategies and Building Blocks

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Rapid Cycle Evaluation (RCE) is a time-sensitive, feedback-oriented approach to evaluation designed to accelerate learning and inform real-time decision-making, especially in complex systems. It typically features the following characteristics:



Iterative, short-cycle data collection and analysis



Practical orientation focused on improvement



Integration into ongoing program operations



Adaptive methods suited to evolving implementation

RCE is not just a method; it is a mindset and infrastructure shift toward agile, evidence-based governance. While many agencies conduct RCEs ad hoc, institutionalizing the practice builds a culture of rapid learning and continuous improvement where obtaining and using actionable data becomes the norm, not an exception.

The Manhattan Strategy Group LLC (MSG) has an established history of working with clients in recognizing where they are on their evaluation journey and identifying actionable steps toward building a sustainable, institutionalized practice. We encourage agency leaders, program managers, and evaluation professionals to pilot an RCE initiative using the strategies outlined in this brief and to engage with our team to explore training, technical assistance, or implementation support to amplify returns on their organization's investments in evaluation.

Institutionalizing agile evaluation, such as RCE, drives organizational efficiency as it builds long-term capacity by embedding data-informed decision-making into routine operations. Unlike traditional evaluations that often occur post hoc and outside core workflows, RCE enables organizations to test, learn, and adapt in near real time. This iterative approach reduces delays between implementation and insight, helping leaders make timely, evidence-based adjustments that minimize waste, improve resource allocation, and enhance service delivery. By systematizing the use of short-cycle feedback loops, organizations reduce dependence on ad hoc assessments and create a culture of continuous learning, streamlining decision-making processes and transforming evaluation from a periodic exercise into an operational asset.

This brief outlines strategies and practical considerations for embedding RCE within public agencies. It draws on recent literature and field practice to identify five critical domains of institutionalization: governance and policy alignment, capacity building, infrastructure and systems, organizational culture, and matching evaluation types to RCE's unique characteristics.



Governance & Policy Alignment

RCE efforts can remain isolated unless anchored to broader agency mandates and integrated into formal governance processes, strategic plans, and accountability frameworks. Therefore, it is critical to develop standard operating procedures and leadership approval pathways for rapid evaluation initiatives.

"Aligning program metrics with organization-wide goals and objectives reinforces the connection between long-term strategic goals and day-to-day activities." (GAO, 2023)

Sustaining RCE requires policies that embed evaluation into decision-making structures. The alignment of rapid learning systems with organizational mandates and strategic goals ensures that evaluation is seen as a management tool, not merely a compliance tool. The Agile Assessment Guide by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) stresses the critical role of organizational governance, leadership engagement, and policy alignment in embedding agile methods across federal agencies. It highlights that agile teams must operate within governance structures that reflect agency-wide strategic objectives, with acquisition and oversight policies designed to support iterative delivery cycles (GAO, 2023).



Capacity Building

Institutionalizing RCE within an organization demands a workforce skilled in RCE methods and adaptive learning. This requires investing in role-based RCE training (e.g., for analysts, program managers, and advisors), establishing internal communities of practice, and embedding evaluators in program teams. By summarizing the training mechanisms that country governments have adopted to build staff capacities, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020) underscores the importance of institutional investments in evaluation functions, including dedicated teams and ongoing professional development, which naturally support role-based RCE training for analysts, program managers, and advisors. With qualified staff, organizations often benefit from embedding evaluators early and across teams to help institutionalize agile learning processes for sustained impact (Ornas et al., 2024).

"Strategies such as providing clear governance and appropriate data and human resources, establishing routine evaluation practices, and encouraging the development of evaluation skills in teams can build staff confidence in their evaluation abilities and increase evaluation capacity." (Bird et al., 2025)



Infrastructure & Systems

Robust data and IT systems are critical to the rapid feedback loops central to RCE. Legacy IT systems may not support real-time data access or rapid feedback. Organizations need to develop an inventory of data systems to identify RCE-ready ones and prioritize interoperable platforms and visualization tools. Additionally, RCE requires streamlining data-sharing agreements and clearance procedures. Mengeling et al. (2021), for example, describe the Veterans Health Administration's use of integrated informatics and shared data platforms to enable timely evaluation.



Organizational Culture

Resistance to change, fear of failure, and rigid hierarchy can hinder the institutionalization of RCE. It takes time to normalize experimentation with RCE and integrate feedback loops into routine operations, it can be even more challenging to make evidence-informed pivots. Senior leaders must model and reward learning behaviors to promote an RCE-supportive culture characterized by openness to learning, tolerance for failure, and iterative decision-making, as continuous quality improvement frameworks foster the psychological safety needed for rapid experimentation (Adebayo, 2022). These cultural conditions enable RCE, where feedback is embraced, failure becomes instructive, and continuous improvement is embedded in operations.

"A culture of evidence-driven decision-making is nurtured in organizations that have robust capacity to not only build evidence but also to use evidence in making strategic decisions." (General Services Administration [GSA], 2023)



Matching Evaluation Types & RCE

RCE is often misunderstood as interchangeable with traditional program evaluation. RCE is ideal for testing prototypes, refining service delivery, and identifying real-time barriers. It aligns best with developmental, formative, and implementation evaluations and is less suited to summative or high-stakes impact evaluations where long timelines and control groups are needed.

EVALUATION TYPE	FIT WITH RCE	RATIONALE
Formative	Excellent	Improves program design or implementation during development or early stages; supports early testing and design iteration
Utilization-Focused	Very Strong	Responds to specific user decisions
Developmental	Strong	Supports innovation in dynamic or complex environments; aligns with adaptive, real-time learning; provides real-time data for course correction
Process/Implementation	Strong	Assesses how a program is being implemented and whether it aligns with intended plans; tracks fidelity and identifies improvement areas
Performance Monitoring	Moderate-Strong	Validates and interprets performance trends or tests small performance interventions; supplements ongoing data with targeted insight
Outcome Evaluation	Possible	Works only when the outcome is measurable within a short period and a narrow question is defined
Impact Evaluation (Summative)	Limited	Not suited for large-scale, multiyear summative evaluations focused on attribution over time



Strategies & Benefits

Institutionalizing RCE is a multifaceted challenge requiring coordinated investments in governance, people, infrastructure, and culture. It requires a deliberate approach that blends technical investment with cultural change. The emerging literature supports a holistic, systems-thinking approach to embed rapid learning across public programs. Organizations and government agencies may consider the following strategies to institutionalize RCE:

- Assess their current evaluation capacity and identify opportunities to apply RCE in their portfolio.
- Endorse RCE in strategic plans and create policy directives authorizing its use.
- Develop a RCE training track with tiered skill levels.
- Modernize data systems to support agile analytics and visualization.
- Incorporate RCE into multiyear evaluation plans alongside other methods.

RCE can be vital for organizations to navigate complex policy and program environments and accelerate collective learning and improvement. Its implementation requires addressing organization capacity, infrastructure, and culture. Organizations that institutionalize RCE are likely to see benefits for years to come.



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