

“The Toughest Beat”

Investing in Employee Well-Being
at the Denver Sheriff Department

Learning Objectives

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**To support staff with
evidence-based,
scalable
interventions by:**

- ✓ Diagnosing a problem (before adopting a solution)
- ✓ Identifying promising practices
- ✓ Deciding when to try out a promising practice
- ✓ Managing risk and risk aversion and building support for experimentation and change

Van Cise-Simonet Detention Center



Source: Jeffrey Beall CC BY-SA

Denver County Jail



Source: Reilly Johnson Architecture

Exploration

**Who are the
key actors in
the case?**

**What do
they value?**

**What are they
most concerned
about?**

Key Actors



Kim Desmond
Mayor's Office of Social
Equity and Innovation



Zach McDade
Senior Statistical Researcher
Denver Department of Public Safety



Jessie Harney
Researcher
UC Berkeley/The People Lab



Elias Diggins
Sheriff
Denver Sheriff Department



Sonya Gillespie
Chief of Administration
Denver Sheriff Department



Andrea Albo
Chief of Staff
Denver Sheriff Department



**What problem was the
Denver Sheriff
Department trying to
solve?**

Theory of Change

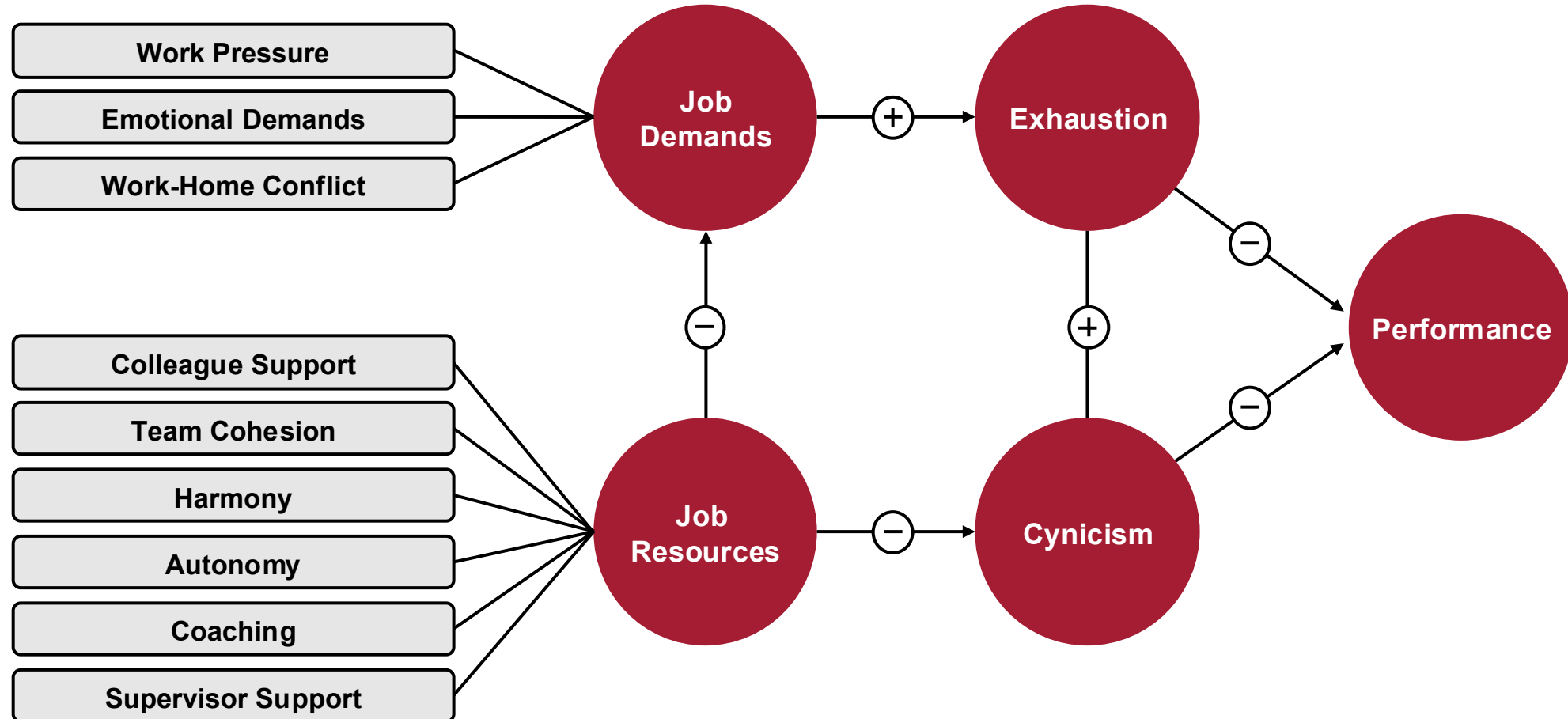
“When you prioritize the needs of deputies and treat them in an inclusive manner, that will inform how they respond to the needs of the folks in the jail system.”

KIM DESMOND

Source: Gaylen W. Moore, Elizabeth Linos, and Jorrit de Jong, “The Toughest Beat: Investing in Employee Well-Being at the Denver Sheriff Department,” President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2024

Diagnosis

Job Demands-Resources Model



Source: Arnold Bakker, H van Emmerik, and Pim Riet, "How Job Demands, Resources, and Burnout Predict Objective Performance: A Constructive Replication," *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping* 21 (2008): 309-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615800801958637>. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>)

Understanding Burnout at DSD

Job Demands

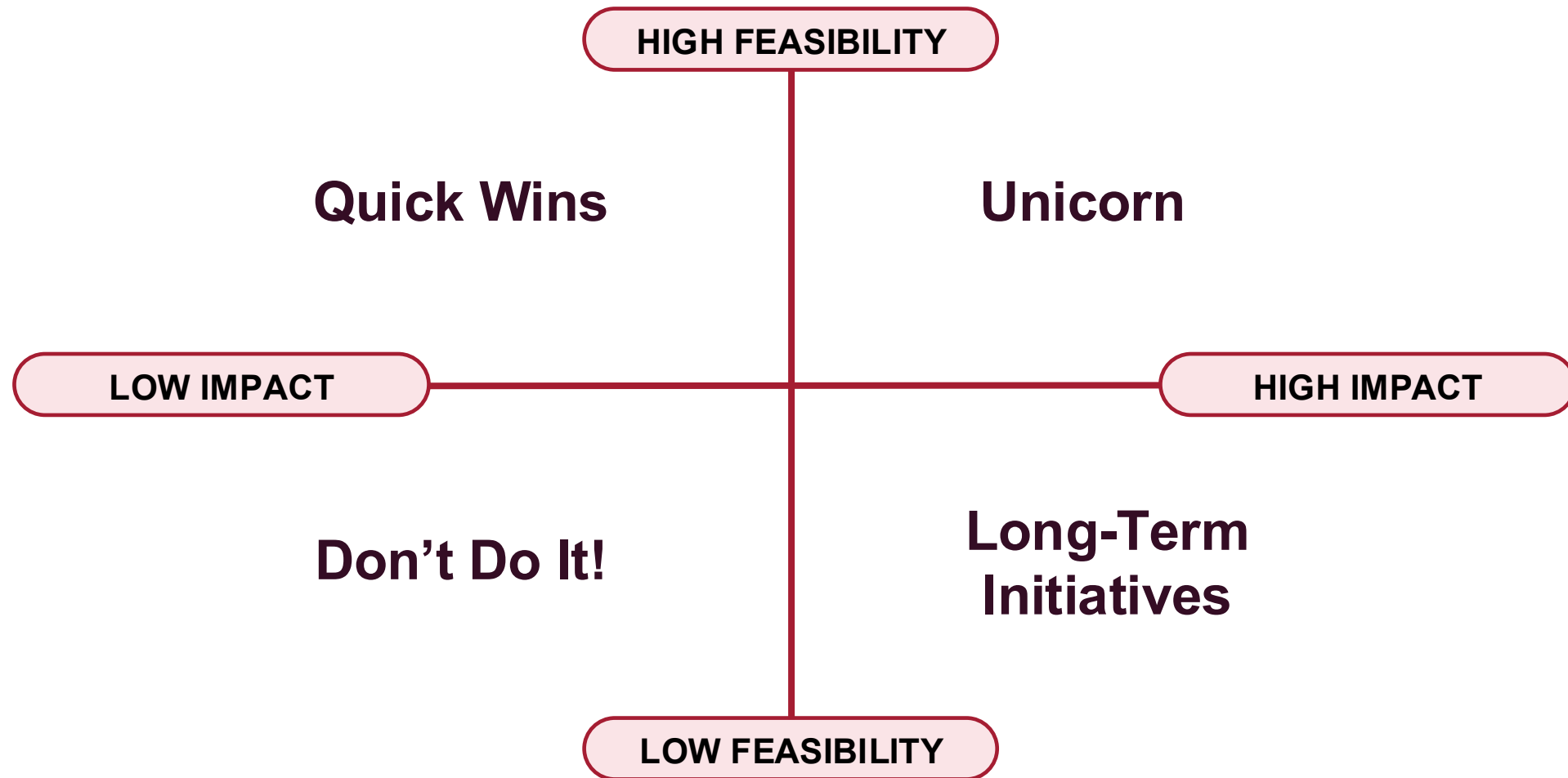
- Tough decisions with limited information
- Long shifts and mandatory overtime
- Emotionally demanding residents

Job Resources

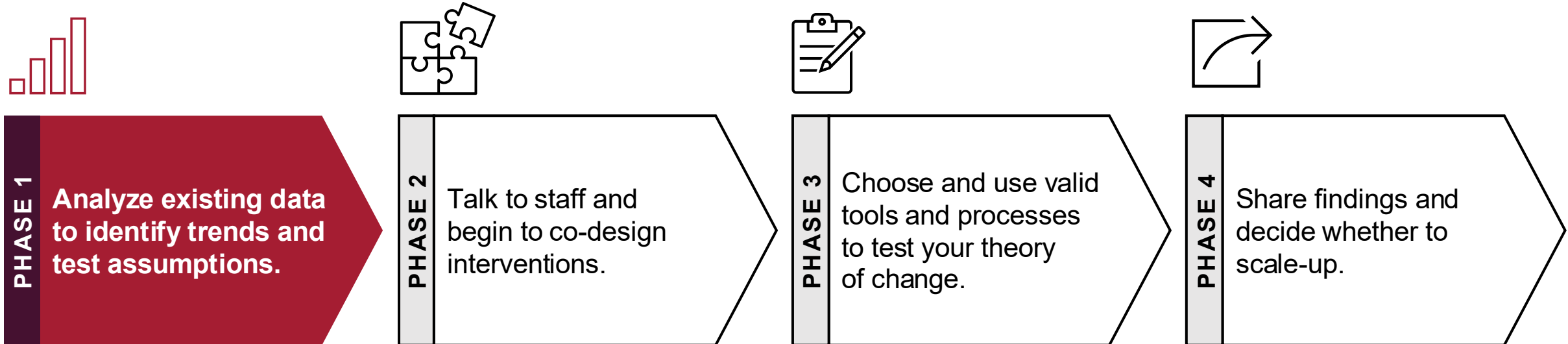
- Peer support
- Supervisor support
- Autonomy/flexibility at work
- Training and development

**To address burnout,
what would
you focus on?**

Impact-Feasibility Matrix



Project Steps, Phase 1



Source: The People Lab

PHASE 1

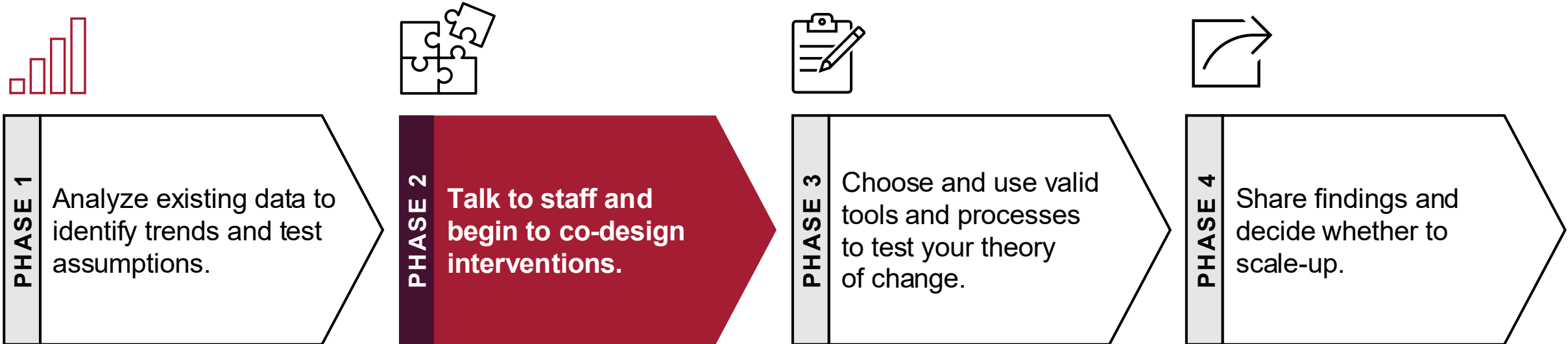
“To have other folks come in and question what we’re doing was tough at first. We thought we were on track. We didn’t realize how much work we needed to do to really go forward.”



SHERIFF ELIAS DIGGINS

Source: Moore et al., “The Toughest Beat”

Project Steps, Phase 2



Source: The People Lab

PHASE 2

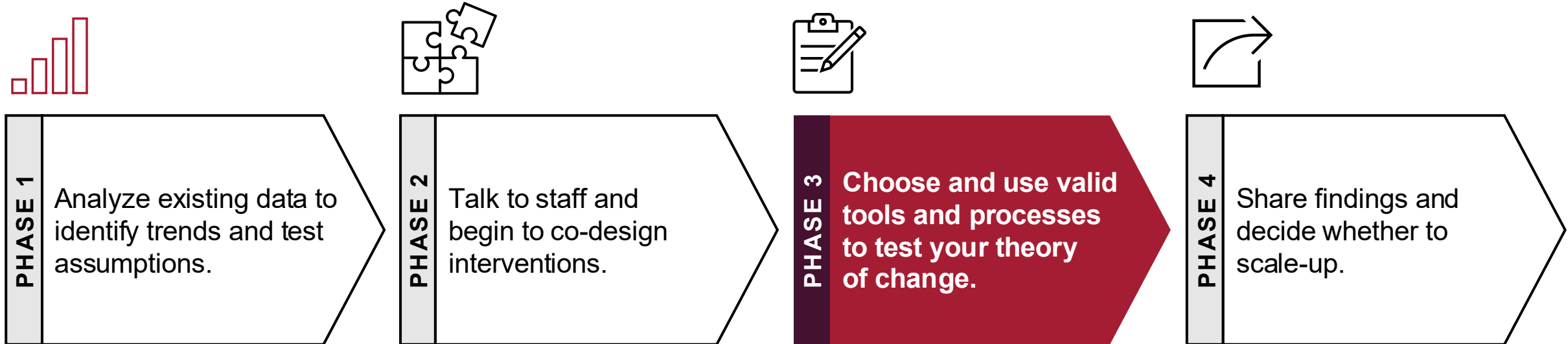
“When we talk about culture, I sometimes get tunnel vision, because this is our culture, and this is what we know. What I was hoping for was to get other ways of looking at things.”



CHIEF OF ADMINISTRATION
SONYA GILLESPIE

Source: Moore et al., “The Toughest Beat”

Project Steps, Phase 3



Source: The People Lab

PHASE 3

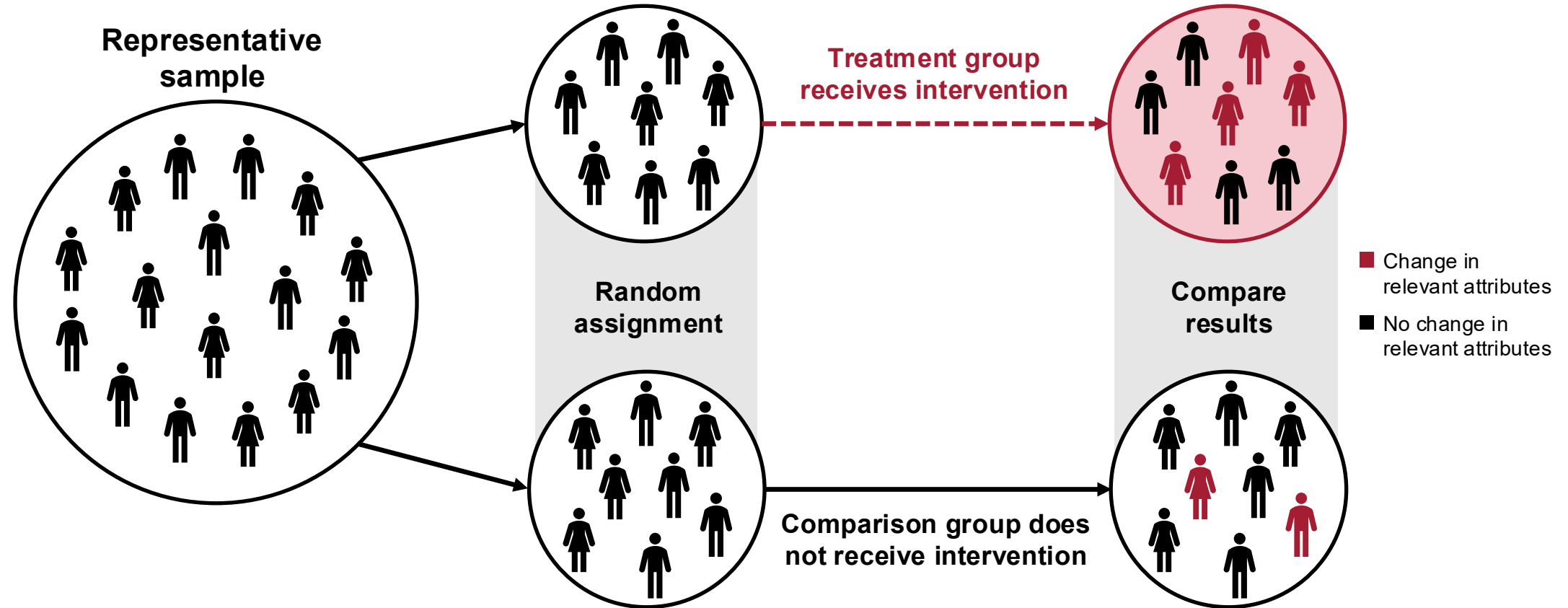
“When you prioritize the needs of deputies and treat them in an inclusive manner, that will inform how they respond to the needs of the folks in the jail system.”



KIM DESMOND
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF SOCIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Source: Moore et al., “The Toughest Beat”

What is a Randomized Controlled Trial (RTC)?

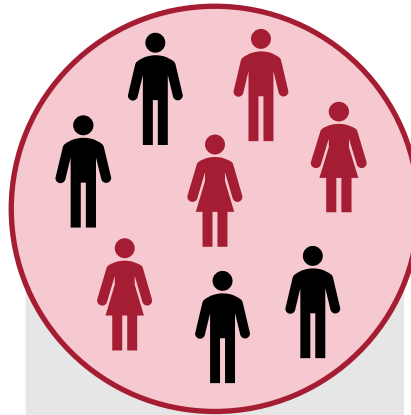


Source: Adapted from Haynes et al., "Test, Learn, Adapt" (2012). Laura Haynes, Owain Service, Ben Goldacre, and David Torgerson, "Test, Learn, Adapt: Developing Public Policy with Randomised Controlled Trials," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2012), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2131581>.

The RCT Design

Intervention group

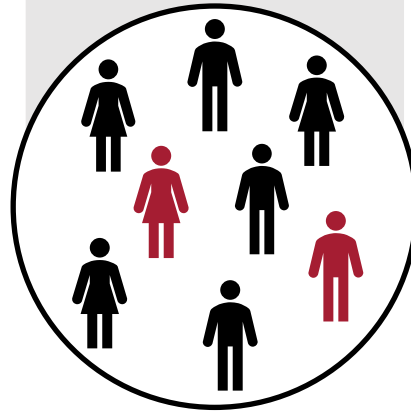
8 weeks, emails focused on social support



Compare
results

Comparison group

8 weeks, emails focused on individual well-being



Metrics

Survey data

- Individual health and wellbeing
- Beliefs about incarcerated people

Administrative data

- Turnover and absenteeism
- Use of force and disciplinary action

Sample Emails

Peer Prompt

Last week, your colleagues shared a lot of great advice that would help someone who is just starting out, including this: [Shared story]. You can access more stories from fellow deputies by clicking [here](#).

As deputies, we work the toughest beat there is. Think about a time when a fellow deputy helped you navigate an emotionally challenging situation at work. How would you offer support to someone in a similar situation?

Individual Prompt

A healthy body needs to have the companionship of a healthy mind. Having some time to collect our thoughts or to decompress from a hard day on the job helps us muster the strength of spirit to face our challenges.

This week, we would like you to take some time to write down what was difficult to deal with this week and how you will help yourself decompress.

But Wait!

**Negative stories
are shared.**

**There are complaints
about DSD leadership.**

People are struggling.

**Is this really improving
well-being?**

**Is there a risk of
negativity snowballing?**



Discuss

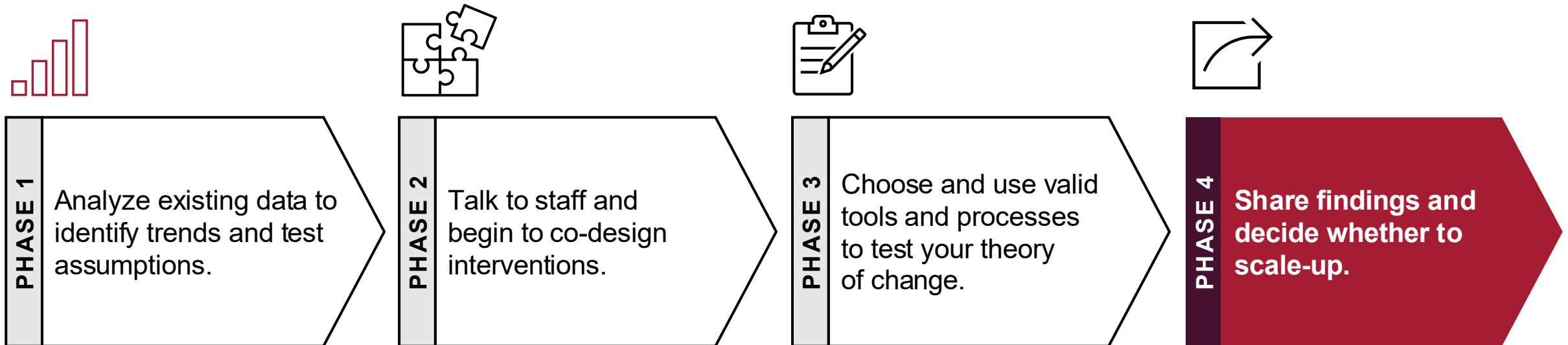
What should Diggs and Gillespie do?

**Continue the
experiment?**

**Stop the
experiment?**

**Something
else?**

Project Steps, Phase 4



Source: The People Lab

Epilogue

What Happened?

The research team asked DSD officials what they wanted to do.



A junior staff member spoke up to encourage leadership to stick with the experiment.



They finished the project as planned.

Study Results for Deputies

Researchers found that deputies who received the peer-focused wellness program:

had increased feelings of self-efficacy, job happiness, and feeling understood, no significant difference in burnout.*

were more likely to indicate that they shared values and beliefs with incarcerated individuals under their care, no hardening of “us vs. them” mentality.

** The intervention took place during the pandemic, which was a complicating factor.*

Takeaways

- ✓ **Invite those who are most impacted to help you understand their challenge and define success.**
- ✓ **Choose an entry point that is**
 - *meaningful* given the nature of the problem;
 - *actionable* given available resources, authority, and time;
 - *acceptable* given the stakeholders and their interests/concerns; and
 - *provisional* so that you might learn what to try next.
- ✓ **Commit to using data to test solutions and invite others to interpret the results.**
- ✓ **Commit to adopting and scaling what works.**

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City Leadership Initiative

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