

Activity: Why This Won't Work - Identifying Risks and Mitigation Strategies

Goals

1. Identify concerns about what could prevent the RSSN from succeeding
2. Distinguish between risks that can be mitigated and constraints that need to be designed around
3. Leave with a shared, prioritized set of risks and preliminary mitigation thinking for the most critical ones

Who should participate

All service providers present at the convening.

Prerequisites

Value Proposition activity (participants should have already articulated why they want this to work)

Framing note:

The goal of this activity is not to talk people out of the RSSN, but to provide a space for participants to voice their concerns & for the RSSN leadership team to hear them. "Unspoken skepticism is the enemy of durable buy-in."

Also - there's a difference between "this is hard" and "this won't work." Some risks are the cost of doing something new & others can torpedo the RSSN if we don't deal with them. This activity should help us tell those apart.

Activity Instructions

Phase 1: Brainstorm

Ask participants to individually write down their honest answers to: "What would make the RSSN fail / fail to launch" adding one concern per sticky note. Give them 3-5 minutes to write silently before sharing. Encourage specificity — "coordination is hard" is less useful than "we don't have anyone whose job it is to follow up when things fall through the cracks."

Seed categories if the group gets stuck, e.g. people and capacity (RSSN adds work without headcount, champions leave); institutional and political (priorities shift, units compete), design and structure (governance too heavy, catalog is a maintenance burden), research experience (they don't see a difference, feels like bureaucracy)

Phase 2: Group and Prioritize

Post all risks and group similar ones. Use sticker voting to identify the risks participants find most likely to occur.

Identify the top 3-5 risks.

Phase 3: Mitigation Discussion

For each top-voted risk, work through three questions as a group:

1. Is this a risk we can mitigate, or a constraint we need to design around?
(Some risks — like "leadership priorities shift" — can't really be prevented, only planned for.)

A **mitigable risk** is one where an action, policy, or structural choice can meaningfully reduce either the likelihood or the impact. For example, "inconsistent referrals" can be mitigated with a better intake process.

A **design constraint** is a risk that exists in the environment and isn't going away, so the question isn't how to prevent it but how to build something that holds up anyway, e.g. the current federal funding landscape.

2. What would need to be true for this not to happen, or to limit the damage if it does?
3. Who or what is responsible for that mitigation? Is it a design decision, a policy, a role, a norm?

Capture the outputs in a simple three-column format: Risk / Mitigation / Owner or Mechanism.

Phase 4: Identify What Needs to Be Decided

Some mitigations will be immediately actionable. Others will surface decisions the group isn't ready to make yet — and that's fine. Name those explicitly as inputs for the Working Groups activity that follows. The goal isn't to resolve everything, it's to know what's unresolved.

Outputs

- A prioritized risk list, with rough categorization of mitigable vs. design constraints
- A preliminary risk/mitigation/owner table for the top 3-5 risks
- A list of open questions and unresolved decisions to hand off to working groups

Facilitator notes

- If the room goes quiet, it usually means people have concerns they don't feel safe voicing yet. Try asking: "What would a skeptic say about this?" or "What would you tell a colleague who was on the fence about participating?"
- Watch for risks that are really grievances in disguise — e.g., "units won't participate equally" may mean someone already feels like they're doing more than their share. Acknowledge it directly rather than papering over it.
- The most important outcome isn't the table — it's that people feel heard. A risk that's been named and taken seriously is far less likely to quietly undermine buy-in later.