

Performance improvement ... or how to get to *great* ...



Once upon a time the focus of healthcare was on quality assurance (QA). Since then we have seen several version addressing quality....quality improvement, continuous quality improvement, total quality improvement and most recently performance improvement (PI). QA was mostly about compliance especially for those organizations that accept outside funds such as Title X family planning programs, whereas PI often has a broader approach.

One of the simplest definitions of quality is doing the right thing, right. As Thada Borstein states in Quality Improvement and Performance Improvement: Different Means to the Same End? (www.reproline.jhu.edu/english/6read/6pi/pi_qi/piqi1.htm), this includes two components: content (doing the right thing) and process (doing it right).

Of particular interest to family planning and women's health programs is performance improvement its relationship to human performance technology (HPT), which is about improving human performance after discovering gaps in performance (current performance and what you would like). Traditionally this has meant training people - all you have to do is increase knowledge and improve skills and the results are improved performance of an individual. If it were that simple, huh?

This approach did not take into account several related components: motivation of individuals, incentives, resources, support, and others. Even today, there are many who believe that "training" is the answer and will fix performance issues. There is a place for training; however, training alone cannot lead to greatness.

According to the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) (<http://www.ispi.org/>), there should be a focus on systems and processes. Management must recognize and understand that processes and systems impact performance of individuals. Commonly this means resolving "the problem of unclear, redundant or incomplete processes or systems." This is not about individuals. Or is it?

Let's consider Jim Collins' Good to Great and the Social Sectors. This is his monograph to his book Good to Great with the subtitle, Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer. He states that "people often obsess on systemic constraints". In other words, we get hung up on things we cannot change. Collins challenges managers to do something now that leads to greatness and not to work on systems issues that you have little control over. This means thinking creatively. By the way, this monograph is highly recommended, weighing in a 35 pages, everyone working in public, not-for-profit, charitable and foundation organizations should read this along with his book. <http://www.jimcollins.com/>

Next is about measurements. It is hard to manage something that you are not measuring. Conversely, if you have information and data, you are in a position to make wise decisions about direction. Again, according to ISPI, measurement helps you analyze processes, identify problems and measure performance. You are making decision on what you know rather than what you think you know. Measurements do not need to be extensive or take a lot of time. A little information can go a

long way to making right decisions.

Are there things you cannot measure? Maybe. However, most of what you need can be measured. Jim Collins refers to the calibration of success and not using business metrics. He has examples of service industry and performance arts. In the service sector, performance is relative to meeting the mission. Collins goes so far to state, "separate inputs from outputs and hold yourself accountable for progress in outputs, even if those outputs defy measurement." The message here is to gather "evidence" that shows progress (or not) and this can be quantitative and/or qualitative.

Metrics, data, information, evidence, measurements and even observations - these all contain an element of error so do the very best with what you have. It more important that you are doing something than nothing and that it makes sense to you.

Where to start? Well, it would be good if you had a strategic plan.

Strategic planning is an area in which some managers ignore because they simply think it is an overwhelming task or it is not needed if funding sources dictate directions. According to Darlene Bainbridge of [Darlene D. Bainbridge & Associates, Inc.](http://www.ddbainbridgeassoc.com) (www.ddbainbridgeassoc.com) the board of directors and management work together to periodically analyze information about current and future healthcare trends and establish a plan that determines how the organization can thrive (this is about growth). These activities are documented into a plan for the future. This is the easy part.

Implementing activities from the plan tends to be a challenge. According to the Drs. Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton, developers of the [Balanced Scorecard](http://www.thepalladiumgroup.com/strategy/bsd/Pages/Welcome.aspx) (www.thepalladiumgroup.com/strategy/bsd/Pages/Welcome.aspx) and authors of a series of books on the same topics, most activities do not get implemented and strategic plans are too often produced and the shelved. In fact it has been stated that as manage as 95% of all strategic plans are never implemented.

This brings us back to performance improvement, where we started. In my work with family planning programs, I have often heard how frustrating it is to receive so little from the federally-funded program of Title X and at the same time comply with all the regulations. To this I respond:

- » Take the funds and you have to comply - institutionalize the regulations so you're your focus is on services, programs, growth and creativity. Compliance of rules and regulations is integrated that it is not where the energy and effort is placed.
- » Partnership with others to grow your organization. For rural family planning clinics, this could be with a small, rural hospital's outpatient services.
- » Grow your organization so certain funds become less important and you achieve a place that you no longer need apply for such funds.

Performance improvement's cause-and-effect approach can help managers to visualize and understand how actions of individuals in the organization contribute to or detract from the quality of the services, the connection with clients and community perceptions. Improvement means looking at the evidence, making plans and implementing activities.