Improving healthcare through culture, strategy and technique

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The reality is that healthcare professionals know what and how to deliver quality healthcare. However, this knowledge is often not translating into practice, usually because healthcare delivery processes are not well designed to enable this to happen. Three components are integral to successful healthcare improvement. This article will discuss improving healthcare using Joseph Juran’s quality trilogy (see Figure 1) and briefly describe how these together will lead to improved quality-of-care. This cannot only ensure successful implementation, but also sustainable results and continuous improvement (see Figure 2).

The fundamental principles of improvement are understanding the work of delivery care to patients in terms of systems and processes; developing solutions by teams of healthcare providers and patients; focusing on patient needs; and testing and measuring effect of changes. In order to incorporate these principles in improvement work, healthcare professionals have heavily stressed the importance of technique in improving healthcare. As important as technique is to implementation, it cannot alone achieve the necessary improvements. It has been over accentuated at the expense of leadership and strategy. There are an abundance of accomplishments and improvements that have taken place in the past that can be attributed to a strong combination of leadership and strategy, in addition to technique. As technique is often emphasised in improvement work and healthcare, this article will focus mainly on leadership and strategy with a slight discussion surrounding technique.

Culture

In improving healthcare, an open, honest culture with knowledge sharing and learning must be embraced. Strong leadership is essential to establishing this improvement culture. In order to achieve this, the leader must identify needed improvements, review and support the work of their teams. They are to maintain the overall responsibility, authority and accountability of the improvements in their organisation. Leaders must determine the resources, select team members, review progress and ensure changes made by the team are monitored. Additionally, leaders feed the data and lessons learned into the system for future improvements.
However, a leader’s role extends far beyond these basic responsibilities. Strong leadership is vital before, during and after the improvement process in order to achieve sustainable results. A leader must create a culture where staff feel empowered throughout and beyond the improvement process. Different actors of care delivery processes and improvement team members communicate often, therefore a leader must embrace open conversations and find a way to create mutual agreement for moving forward. The leader must orient the team in the work, but most importantly represent the team fairly to the rest of the organisation.

An improvement culture includes leadership that enables people to have open and honest conversations and empowers them to confidently make decisions in order to achieve better results. It is vital the leader sets up the means to measure the results to allow team members to manage and see evidence of the improvements occurring. When negative results arise, the leader’s role is to identify the opportunity to learn and inspire team members to see the negatives as also a success. The culture must embody shared learning of successes and failures. Empowering staff to share learning and experiences is crucial to productivity and effectiveness.

**Strategy**

Strategy is equally as important as culture in improving and sustaining high quality healthcare. In fact, it is directly linked, as culture must be considered throughout the development of the improvement strategy. As mentioned previously, a leader’s role begins before the improvement work does. Leaders are a part of the core process of selecting and defining the project and team as well as identifying resources. The strategy must prioritise work in a sequential manner and enable teams to successfully take on these on a continuous basis. A strong strategy also identifies the intended outcomes and how to measure said outcomes, while considering the culture and context of the work.

Any weakness in a strategy adds unnecessary time and effort to improvement work. Therefore, if leaders and team members are not judicious about what they work on and how they work on it, they
will spend an unnecessary amount of time and energy accomplishing tasks. Inefficiency has not only a poor effect on outcomes, but also on morale. A key component of a strong strategy is to identify the necessary incentives for motivating team members. A strong leader must appeal and nurture people’s hearts and minds and incorporate this into the improvement strategy. It is vital improvement work is considered at the intellectual and moral level of all team members during the strategy development.

**Technique**

As can be deduced from the previously mentioned fundamental principles of improvement, technique is clearly integral to sustainable improvement work. However, without a combination of a strong improvement culture and strategy, technique is not enough to achieve long lasting results. Understanding performance is a key characteristic of the system. Identifying and prioritising the areas for improvement and implementing changes yield improvements. The focus must be on the needs and expectations of customers, person and patient-centric.

**Conclusion**

As can be clearly seen, these three core components of successful improvement work are all closely intertwined. Without one part of the triad, the work may see success in the short-term but it will not be sustained. The culture must support, motivate and empower team members as well as have a strong leader who sets the direction of the work, with a clear strategy in place. Systems, processes and results must be clearly analysed, including taking an in-depth look at individuals who carry out various functions in the system and the hand overs that occur. A leader must find team members who have the appropriate technique to implement changes and, or ones that are willing to learn to do so. In order to improve processes, the whole improvement work must be carefully coordinated, motivated and led, all included in the triad.

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