3. Deciding Where to Focus Your Improvement Efforts

Key Points

- Once you identify areas in need of improvement, you need to establish priorities.
- Targeting improvement efforts requires you to identify the underlying causes of problems.
  - You can use several techniques to identify the root cause.
  - You may need to review or gather more information to understand why the problem is occurring.

Once you understand where your organization has to do a better job of meeting consumers' needs, the next step is to determine where exactly to apply the organization's attention and resources.

Setting Priorities for Improvement Efforts

One of the first challenges is to decide on priorities within the areas that would benefit from performance improvement. To use limited resources effectively and keep everyone focused on the improvement goal, start with just one to three survey measures at most; this list can be expanded over time as the improvement team documents progress and has capacity to take on other goals.

To prioritize efforts, the improvement team may want to discuss several questions, including:

- **How "big" is the opportunity to improve?** This can be difficult to quantify, but the team can get a sense of what could be achieved by looking at other Marketplaces' scores. (See more information in section 2, *How to Interpret and Use the Marketplace Survey Results*.)
- **Which improvement targets would be in line with the priorities of Marketplace leaders and external stakeholders?** (See exhibit 3.1.)
- **Which improvements would be in line with your organization's readiness to improve?** (See appendix C, *Resources on Organizational Readiness*.)
- **Which improvement targets would likely have positive effects in other areas** (e.g., staff satisfaction)?
- **What is the feasibility of making changes that will actually improve consumer experience and performance on the Marketplace Survey?** This assessment requires having an idea of what it would take to address the problem(s) underlying the scores.

Keeping Marketplace Leaders Engaged in Improvement Efforts (Exhibit 3.1)

Leadership support and involvement is the number one factor associated with the success of performance improvement projects. Be sure your Marketplace's leadership is supportive of whatever improvement strategies you undertake and is prepared to make sufficient resources available. Leadership involvement may also be needed to remove barriers to change.[i, ii]

>> **Learn more:** See appendix B for talking points you can use for presentations to Marketplace leaders, colleagues, and stakeholders about the importance of improving the consumer experience with the Marketplace and how the Marketplace Survey results can help. Once the improvement effort is underway, periodic progress reports can also help to keep leaders informed and engaged.

[i] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources Services Administration. (2011, April). *Quality improvement*. http://www.hrsa.gov/quality/toolbox/508pdfs/qualityimprovement.pdf

[ii] Kotter, J. P. (2007, January). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review, 85*(1), 96–103. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2007/01/leading-change-why-transformation-efforts-fail

Once your improvement team decides which aspects of the consumer experience to improve, the team can focus on establishing goals. Developing an aim statement that all team members can agree on will help guide the team successfully through the improvement efforts.[8, 1, 2] Exhibit 3.2 provides suggestions for writing SMART aim statements.

SMART Aim Statements (Exhibit 3.2)

- **S**pecific: Be as specific as possible about what needs to change and how to change it.
- **M**easurable: Identify how the impact of the change will be measured.
- **A**ttainable: Develop a solution that is doable for staff.
- **R**elevant: Develop a solution that will lead to improvement in Marketplace Survey results.
- **T**ime-bound: Establish a timeline for the performance improvement plan.

Identifying the Underlying Causes of a Low Survey Score

While Marketplace Survey results will alert you to problems, the improvement team must identify and understand the root causes of those problem before implementing improvement initiatives.

Let's say that the Marketplace Survey results indicate that consumers are having trouble getting needed information from the Marketplace's call center staff. The ability of frontline staff to provide effective service could be disrupted by any number of factors, such as a lack of tools to do the job, inadequate access to critical information, and multi-step processes that delay responses to callers. Identifying the root causes will help you hone in on the most likely reasons for the problem and the strategies that are most likely to help. It could also reveal that a strategy that seems unrelated would in fact be beneficial. For example, as you investigate the causes of long waits on the phone, you may determine that problems with the usability of your website increased call volume. In this case, your improvement efforts may be more effectively targeted at the usability of your website than the efficiency of your call center staff.

How to Find Root Causes

Your improvement team can choose among three different types of techniques for root cause analysis:

- **5 Whys:** A simple tool that asks staff involved in the work "why" up to five or more times to encourage deeper thinking about what causes a problem.
- **Process mapping:** A flowchart, matrix, or spreadsheet that shows each step in a process, including the people, inputs, steps, decision points, information flow, and (sometimes) time to complete steps. For an example of a high-level process map showing the flow of a Marketplace's online application, see *Pathway to Enrollment: A Virtual Tour of Covered California's Online Application,* available at: http://www.chcf.org/publications/2014/09/infographic-pathway-enrollment.
- **Customer journey map:** A comprehensive picture of consumer experience from their viewpoint as they interact with the Marketplace through the website, on the phone, and face-to-face.

>> **Learn more:** These techniques are described in appendix D, which also suggests resources for learning more about each one.

Using Other Information Sources to Identify Causes and Solutions

As you work through the root cause analysis, you may need more information to understand why the issue occurred. Both process maps and customer journey maps rely on information gleaned from approaches such as process observation, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and small-scale surveys.

>> **Learn more**: Tips for using these approaches to gather information are offered in exhibit 3.3.

To better understand consumers' experiences and where challenges or problems originate, the improvement team can also take advantage of existing sources of Marketplace data, such as records from the website, call center, or in-person assisters that describe or quantify the workflow, work volume, types of inquiries, or other information. Other administrative data available in your organization may include:

- Average number of callers per hour or time of day.
- Frequency of the types of inquiries received.
- Frequency of the types of complaints received.
- Website analytics.

The improvement team may be able to request routine and/or ad hoc reports from the Marketplace's customer service databases.

>> **Learn more**: Once the improvement team has collected information about the reasons underlying a Marketplace Survey score, the next step is to select and implement one or more performance improvement interventions. Appendix D offers an overview of a few well-established methods to help you test, implement, and spread a change across your Marketplace.

Four Approaches to Collecting Information (Exhibit 3.3)

- **Process observation.** Observe call center staff, assisters, and others interacting with consumers by both listening to and seeing what does and doesn't occur. Document each observation on a recording sheet or checklist.[3]
- **One-on-one interviews.** Formal and informal interviews with consumers and staff serving consumers can provide insight into problems. People on the front lines often know best what is and isn't working. Use a semi-structured interviewing technique that includes a list of topics to cover but that also allows the interviewee to bring up additional topics that are relevant to understanding the problem. Ideally, interviews should be conducted with at least six people of each type (e.g., six consumers and six staff).[4]
- **Focus groups.** Focus groups can capture the opinions and perceptions of consumers or staff in a relatively short time. Using an interview guide, a moderator leads a discussion about a given topic with a group of six to 10 individuals, generally for 60 to 120 minutes. The conversation is often dynamic, with participants adding to what others say. Two focus groups are recommended to increase the chances that major issues are uncovered.[5] If resources are limited, the improvement team could informally facilitate a discussion as part of a staff meeting or other planned event.
- **Small-scale surveys.** Even though the Marketplace Survey report presents your Marketplace's results, it may be necessary to ask consumers or staff about specific issues. This method can be done in-person, in writing, electronically, or by telephone. The team identifies the purpose of a survey, develops questions, specifies the characteristics of the people to survey ("respondents"), conducts the survey, and summarizes the results.