

Simple tools for tackling quality improvement initiatives

“Little by little, a little becomes a lot” – Tanzanian Proverb

As lab professionals working in challenging times, taking on quality improvement projects may seem daunting. Often, quality issues can seem too big to tackle and too complex to understand leaving us paralyzed in inaction...or...am I the only one that has ever felt this way? Once a quality issue or initiative has been identified, it is helpful to approach it in a methodical manner. There are many tools available within the quality toolkit. In this session, I will introduce 3 simple tools that I find to be effective in moving forward with quality improvement projects. These are a simple project planning tool, process mapping and the very simple but effective Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle.

A simple project planning tool is key in gaining clarity as well as communicating the aim or goal of a quality improvement initiative. A number of factors are considered in the planning phase. These include but are not limited to scope, deliverables, timelines, data to understand current state, stakeholders, sponsors (if required), communication plan, key assumptions, roles and responsibilities and sustainment plan. Investing time up front in planning and communication is one of the key factors to ultimate success of a QI project.

The second tool I would like to discuss is the process map. Process mapping with subject matter experts such as the front line staff can provide valuable insights for opportunities for improvement. It's an opportunity to objectively question why we are doing things the way we are and also identifying gaps in what we think is happening and what is actually happening.

Once the opportunities for improvement have been identified via process mapping, brainstorming sessions, best practices or experience will lead us to ideas that we think will help us achieve the improvement goal. This is where the PDSA cycle is of great value. It is a systematic way to test ideas of change on a small scale to ensure our assumptions and ideas in fact did result in the improvement we were predicting. Small scale tests help avoid the potential pitfall of implementing and committing limited lab resources to ideas that in fact do not lead to the improvement we were expecting. Most importantly, the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle helps put the 'do' back in quality improvement.

Using these three tools and starting by scoping small and then subsequently building on successes to gain momentum may just be the key to see that “little by little, a little becomes a lot”.

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