

Successful Service Transformation

**Planning and Committing to
Improvement Actions**

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Introduction

The purpose of organisational review is to enable teams to focus their resources and attentions on achieving tangible changes in the way the organisation works, which will in turn lead to improvements in the outcomes achieved.

The process of translating the identified areas for improvement into significant ('breakthrough') improvements is challenging. This guidance will help. If you require further guidance or support for effective facilitation, contact The National Archives Sector Development Team.

Principles of Improvement Planning

- (a) Improvement planning involves identifying the improvement projects which will make the greatest difference to the organisation's capability to achieve enhanced outcomes. The improvement plan should contain a small number of 'breakthrough' improvement projects, supported by some 'quick wins', rather than many improvement actions relating to parts of the organisation (or parts of the Resilience Model). At first this may seem counter-intuitive, as many areas for improvement will have been established during the self-assessment.
- (b) If you have sufficient resources, you could allocate the improvement projects to improvement project teams, which are given the complete responsibility to plan and implement the improvement action. Ideally, these teams should comprise staff involved in the particular process at all levels.
- (c) The improvement projects should achieve sustainable change to people's collective working behaviours. This is achieved by focusing the projects on tackling the underlying cause of the behaviours (e.g. leadership thinking).
- (d) Experience tells us that improvement projects often lead to negative unintended consequences (they can make things worse!). To reduce the risk of this happening, leaders and improvement teams need to recognise, work on and influence the wider network of interactions (i.e. the 'system') which have an impact on, or are affected by, the planned changes in the long-term ('systemic improvement').
- (e) To ensure effectiveness of this plan it is important that it is not seen as an 'add-on' to the organisation. It must be an integral element of service / business plans. Therefore, it is important that the self-assessment programme is co-ordinated with the normal planning cycle.
- (f) The improvement plan must be a working document, which enables the organisation to focus its resources and attentions on changing the way it works, which will in turn lead to improvements in the outcomes achieved.

Improvement planning sessions

After the consensus self-assessment sessions and / or peer review, the self-assessment team should meet again to reach consensus on the following ten steps (those involved in identifying the areas for improvement should also own responsibility for planning the improvement activity). Members of the management team who were not directly involved in the self-assessment should be invited, to ensure leadership support for the changes.

The sessions need to be led by a skilled facilitator, who could be a member of the team, someone from another department, a partner, or an external specialist. Often, 'critical friends' are invited to the sessions to provide an external challenge (this role could be played by the facilitator). The trigger questions shown below will help the facilitator to guide the team and challenge their thinking.

Step 1 – Identify your main areas for improvement

- What themes ('golden threads' and 'fault lines') run throughout the areas for improvement identified in your self-assessment or peer review?
- Bearing in mind your vision, wider strategy and plans, which areas for improvement are most important to you?

Step 2 – Establish your significant improvement projects

- What are the underlying causes of the above main key areas for improvement?
- What major improvement projects (projects leading to changes in the way people work) would make the greatest difference to your community and other stakeholders?
- What improvement activity are you currently working on?
- Given your resources, which improvement projects will you be able to complete?

NOTE: If the team identifies creative ideas at this stage relating to specific new practices, capture these so that they can be passed on to the improvement project leader (see step 4). Some organisations keep a running resource of all new ideas identified by staff, partners and customers (e.g. an 'ideas greenhouse'), which is used by people responsible for planning and implementing improvement activity.

Step 3 – Define the outputs of each improvement project

- Specifically, what will have changed when these projects have been completed?
- How will you know that the change has been achieved? (avoid setting numerical targets)

Step 4 – Establish 'who'

- Who will lead each improvement project? Which senior manager will be the 'champion'?
- Who will be involved in the improvement activity? Can you set up an improvement team? If so who should be included in or invited to these teams?
- Who else needs to be consulted or influenced?

Step 5 – Think systemically about the improvement activity

- What will this improvement project achieve, for whom? What will this achieve? (the ‘outcomes’)
- What has, or will have, an impact on these improvement projects (from inside or outside of the organisation)? How does this affect whom you will involve in the improvement activity?
- What will these improvement projects affect (inside or outside of the organisation)? How does this affect whom you will involve in the improvement activity?

Step 6 – Identify timelines

- When will you start each improvement project? (it doesn’t have to be straight away)
- When do you plan to achieve the project outputs?

Step 7 – Establish a plan of ‘quick wins’

- Which minor improvement actions will provide the opportunity for some easy ‘quick wins’?
- Who will be responsible for implementing each action?
- When will each action be implemented?

Step 8 – Develop a monitoring and review cycle

- How will you monitor progress with the improvement activity?
- How will you review whether the project outputs have been achieved?
- How will you review the effectiveness and efficiency of the improvement activity in the long-term?

Step 9 – Put the improvement plans at the heart of the organisation

- Who else needs to agree the improvement plan? How will you achieve this?
- Whom do you need to influence in relation to this plan? How will you achieve this?
- Where will these improvement projects and ‘quick wins’ be documented? (e.g. within the organisation’s strategy or business plan or a separate but interlinked document)
- Whom should you communicate the plan to? How will you achieve this?

Step 10 – Elicit and develop the team’s commitment to the improvement plan

- What will happen when these improvements have been achieved?
- What would happen if these improvements are not made?
- On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being not committed at all, 10 being passionately committed), how committed are you to each improvement project and action? What would it take to move you to a 10?

After this planning session(s), the team should take the actions identified in Step 9.

Planning the specific actions

If you have sufficient resources, this phase could be given to an improvement project team. If not, you might want to invite additional / different people to these sessions (e.g. partners, peers, volunteers and specialist advisors) to make use of their knowledge and to develop their ownership of the changes.

- a. Take each of the improvement projects and remind yourself of the 'outputs'. Be sure that you all understand clearly and specifically what will have changed when the project has been completed.
- b. For each of the improvement projects, ask the following:
What specifically is not working in this area?
What is the underlying cause of this?
- c. Bear in mind the desired output and your answers to the above two questions, identify what actions could be taken to tackle the improvement priorities? (not 'what will we do?'). This involves creative thinking. Try a silent 'mindstorming' exercise using coloured 'Post-it Notes' to identify as many possible actions as possible for each member of the team.
- d. Establish which of the ideas are the best and which you will be able to take.
- e. Agree which specific actions you will take.
- f. Identify who will be responsible for taking the actions (including the 'quick wins'). Who will assist?
- g. Identify when the actions will be completed by.
- h. Consider what organisation, team or person would be worth learning from.

Monitoring and review of progress

The team should discuss and reach consensus on the following:

- a. How will we ensure the improvement projects and 'quick wins' are completed? NOTE: build monitoring and review of improvement projects into your regular management team meetings.
- b. How will we ensure that the changes are effective?
- c. Continue to monitor, review and adjust the improvement projects until the outputs have been achieved and the projects are effective.
- d. Clearly document what has happened, including what has worked as planned, what hasn't worked as planned and unintended consequences, to enable people to learn from this experience in the future.
- e. Of course you can't take your eye off the ball! Things have a habit of changing over time, and you might need to go back to the beginning!

Tips for facilitators

- Remember that your goal is to stimulate discussion among all team members, challenge and refine people's thinking and help the team to arrive at a consensus agreement (i.e. all the team members are happy to stand behind the decisions)
- Follow the process – avoid the temptation to skip steps or shortcut the process
- Use the questions as necessary depending on how the discussions progress
- Do not judge any of the responses, voice your opinions or seek to give advice
- Capture the responses on flipchart
- Large coloured stick notes can be useful, as they enable the facilitator or team members to move and group people's thoughts and ideas in view of the rest of the team