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From the Field

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Designing systems to improve addiction treatment: *The foundation*

This article is the first in a series that describes how redesigning your organizational processes can offer an immediate and controllable path to improving quality of and access to addiction treatment services.

Quality has long been a concern – and a point of pride – in the substance abuse treatment field. For the past five years, interest in quality has intensified and, as a result, there has been an acceleration of innovations designed to improve addiction treatment services. One example is the CSAT sponsored Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC).

Despite these advances, even the most talented counselors using the most effective clinical treatment protocols have limited impact if their services cannot be accessed. Cumbersome organizational processes that are burdensome to the client and/or the staff can stand in the way of maximizing an agency's potential. Such processes can include difficult-to-use phone systems, hard-to-schedule intake assessments, and lengthy waits for service.

Of course, developing and deploying innovative approaches to overcome such organizational barriers can be a daunting task, particularly if an organization is feeling the effects of a financial squeeze. To make this task less formidable, researchers have conducted substantial analyses in an attempt to isolate the factors that distinguish successful organizations from less successful ones. Using similar research methods, they have examined 80 different factors across 640 companies in 13 different industries. The most exciting thing about their research is that they were able to isolate a handful of factors that can easily be translated into practice. These are:

Customer focus. Successful companies are much more committed to understanding their customers. They are more likely to:

- Assume they do NOT know what their customers need and, therefore, actively involve the customer in the development of their improvement.
- Make sure that the improvement is noticeable to the customer and that it will meet one of the customer's key needs.
- Survey customers on a regular basis.
- Educate customers about new improvements.

The substance abuse field is unique, as are its customers. Still, taking the time to involve customers, getting their reactions to and advice about improvements, and preparing them for anticipated changes, are all ways that a treatment agency can respond to its customers' unique needs.

Source of ideas. Organizations that go outside their own boundaries to get ideas are more likely to be successful. This doesn't suggest that outsiders or experts have all the answers; rather, it draws attention to the importance of learning from others' successes and failures. Looking outside the organization is an efficient way to find fresh ideas - the kind of ideas that lay the foundation for a *tailored* and truly innovative improvement.

Change agent. The literature clearly shows that if you want to improve something, the person in charge of improving it must have power, prestige and influence in the organization. They also must understand and respect the needs of the staff members who will be involved in the implementation process.

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Carefully selected improvements. What is keeping the executive director awake at night? The research indicates that it is *crucial* to select a project that addresses a key organizational goal. If the project can help the executive director sleep better, he or she will actively support the project and do everything in his or her power to make the project a success.

No bugs! The research also shows that successful organizations pilot test their changes with their customers. This allows them to be sure that the improvements work as intended and that they make things better for staff, not worse. Successful organizations don't implement changes until they know they work.

These are the five elements that determine success. They may seem elementary at first glance, but the research shows that – elementary or not – their absence is likely to sabotage even the best of intentions. Most importantly, they are practical, which makes them promising for a field that is seeking innovative ways to improve quality of and access to its treatment services.

Readers interested in finding out more about innovative organizational change can turn to the following published articles.

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