

Editorial: Defining Quality, Delivering Quality

By Tim Smith, Executive Director

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According to Philip Crosby in *Quality Without Tears*, “quality is conformance with specifications.” In manufacturing, for example, if product specifications call for a piece of steel that is two inches square, 1/4-inch thick, with a 3/16-inch hole drilled precisely in the center, quality is measured by how closely an item matches that description. Anything that deviates from the specifications is identified as “low quality” and unacceptable. Importantly, specifications—and ultimately quality—are determined by consumers of the product.

Applying this idea to addiction treatment, we can ask, “What are the specified outcomes of treatment, and who determines them?” Historically, abstinence from all chemical use was the ultimate and only outcome. Now, few people have a clear specification of the outcome. Everyone wants quality, but few can (or will) identify exactly what they want. For example, a parent bringing her child to treatment rarely says, “I want my son to show a score of 95% on the readiness-to-change index, go for three days without a temper outburst, and say ‘yes ma’am, no ma’am’ when speaking to me.”

As a treatment provider, I can set my own standards, but I will likely set them to meet my capabilities. I may even resist standards established by the parent, client, or the payor, as though he or she is “telling me how to do my job.” But as the manufacturing example suggests, shouldn’t the client determine his or her desired outcomes? I would say yes, and the treatment provider—based on experience—can work with clients to determine appropriate, achievable outcomes. Furthermore, we need to define outcome specifications for each phase of the treatment process, or we will not achieve quality. As members of NIATx, we also need to look at how the original NIATx aims—reduced time to treatment, reduced no-shows, increased admissions, and increased continuation in treatment—contribute to outcomes, as we chose to define them.

Determining the desired outcomes of treatment with our clients is, then, the first part in achieving quality. The delivery of those outcomes, however, is contingent upon the system designed to achieve them. Edward Deming, the “father of process improvement,” explains that the behavior of an individual can only contribute to meeting a specified goal insofar as the system makes reaching the goal possible. His point is that we cannot reward or punish individuals for their success or failure to achieve a stated goal: if the person succeeds, it is because the system is designed to generate success.

Deming’s idea is an intriguing and challenging concept. As “systems” thinkers, I think we would tend to agree with this idea. Yet, everyday I find examples of how we blame individuals for their “failures,” without recognizing the influences of our system. It seems to me that a flow chart or “value stream map” of a process, from start to finish, is the only way we can adequately conceptualize a system, so we see it as the sum of its components. Then we can look at the behavior of individuals in context: how they are affected by other individuals or the flow of work?

Crosby, however, notes that creating an effective system relies on senior management's commitment to quality. The job of management is to ensure that the system is designed to promote success, not failure. We must eliminate the possibility of failure by building systems that not only produce quality outcomes, but safeguard against "non-quality" outcomes. As an Executive Director, I am overwhelmed by this responsibility, and yet I see it as perhaps the only pathway by which my organization can succeed. This is not simply "top-down" management, however. I believe the design of a system to promote quality must come from all stakeholders, but senior management holds the authority (and hence the responsibility) needed to ensure success on a system-wide level.

Recommended Readings

Crosby, Philip B. (1995). *Quality without tears: The art of hassle-free management*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Deming, W. Edwards. (2000). *Out of the crisis*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Sanborn, Mark. (2004). *The Fred factor: How passion in your work and life can turn the ordinary into the extraordinary*. New York: Double Day.

Senge, Peter M. (1994). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Double Day.