

Introduction

We began NIATx in 2003 as a learning collaborative. Our goal was to help participating treatment centers develop and apply process improvement techniques to improve the quality of care they offered. When we began, we were working with 39 substance abuse treatment centers. By 2011, a network of over 2,500 agencies, from all across the country, in a variety of healthcare and public welfare industries, were using the NIATx model for process improvement to improve the services they offer their clients and establish efficient, productive business practices.

NIATx is a pioneering process improvement center, part of the Center for Health Enhancement Systems Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Originally, NIATx was the acronym for The Network for the Improvement of Addiction Treatment. Today we are known simply as NIATx to represent our expansion into other areas of behavioral health as well as social services.

What we know from our experience is that the failure to get services has less to do with the client and his or her abilities and more to do with the way in which services are delivered. NIATx focuses on the service delivery system. If we know people are reluctant to use behavioral health services or that people involved with the criminal justice or child welfare systems come to those services involuntarily, then logically, the services need to be easy to access, easy to use, and engaging rather than forbidding. We founded NIATx on the conviction that what inhibits many organizations from delivering the kind of care they'd like to isn't resources or staff—it's problematic processes in the work system.

1

What do we mean when we refer to an agency's processes? Simply put, a process is the series of actions taken to produce a particular outcome. For example, when a potential client picks up the phone to call your agency seeking help, that's one step in a process whose outcome is the scheduled appointment. The way that an agency does business—its work system—is the sum of its processes. And when an outcome regularly is not achieved (i.e., the client doesn't get services), it indicates that there is a flaw somewhere in the process—not in the client, not in the staff person completing the process, but in the process itself.

Knowing this, we established NIATx with the belief that substance abuse treatment organizations, and subsequently the other types of organizations that have also adopted our practices, could improve their services by redesigning their work systems using process improvement techniques. By identifying the internal practices and processes that inhibit its ability to provide effective, timely care, an agency could then make changes to those processes to eliminate those problems and make progress toward improvement.

Of course, it's easy to acknowledge the need for improvement; it's far more difficult to determine exactly how to do it, especially in an environment where time and resources are scarce, and improvement often seems impossible. Knowing this, we developed a model for

process improvement that could serve as a straightforward guide for service organizations seeking to improve their processes and provide better services for more people. In our model, an organization sets out a goal for improvement, and then examines its internal processes to determine how they might be changed to make that goal a reality. There are no complicated data elements to collect, no levels of training, nothing that requires staff to take a couple weeks off from their scheduled duties to flow chart and redesign the workflow. This model is simple, streamlined, and adaptable by organizations with few resources.

What the NIATx Model Does

Improvement is a vague concept. It's possible to recognize the need for improvement without knowing exactly what that improvement would look like. What makes some services better than others?

To reach a goal, you need to know how to define the problem and identify what an acceptable level of improvement is. Clearly defining a goal is the first step toward determining which actions will need to be taken to get there. A key component of the NIATx model is that it removes ambiguities surrounding the word "improvement" by clearly defining concrete, measurable objectives.

2

Since the beginning of NIATx, we've defined improvement, in our context, as increasing access to and retention in services. Access to services and retention in services are key problems of addiction treatment, mental illness treatment, and rehabilitation for people involved in criminal activities.

The NIATx Aims

Because we know that specific goals lead to manageable, doable projects, NIATx organizations initiate change projects that target one of four specific aims:

1. Reduce Waiting Time (the time elapsed between the first call for help and the first service)
2. Reduce No-shows (the percentage of scheduled appointments that are missed)
3. Increase Continuation (the percentage of clients who remain in treatment through the fourth treatment session)
4. Increase Admissions (the number of people admitted into the program)

These four aims are considered the "original" NIATx aims. As the NIATx model has matured, addiction treatment organizations have used it to target other aims, such as improving "handoffs" between levels of care, increasing the use of evidence-based practices, or improving their billing systems. We'll discuss these in Chapter 3.

The way we see it, the goal of a service organization is to do everything it can to make the client's experience as smooth and easy as possible. This is particularly necessary when the need for the service is generated by illness or other problems that people would rather not address. A service organization must identify the barriers clients face—the reasons why they don't enter treatment or services, don't make it to appointments, or drop out early—and change the processes involved to eliminate these barriers and replace them with processes that facilitate, rather than inhibit, access and retention.

The NIATx Principles

The NIATx model, and indeed our philosophy toward change, is driven by five principles that have been shown to be the hallmarks of successful improvement projects. As you'll learn in Chapter 2, we developed these principles through an analysis of decades' worth of research, across a number of industries, of why certain projects fail while others succeed. These five principles are the underlying structure upon which NIATx change projects are built and when applied effectively, they will give a project the solid foundation it needs to succeed. You'll learn more about the five principles, and how we developed them, in Chapter 2. Here, we give you a quick introduction.

Principle 1: Understand and Involve the Customer

Understanding and involving the customer is the single most important action you can take to set up your project for success. In fact, our analysis showed that this one principle has a greater impact on success than the other four combined. Lose sight of your customer (your client) and you lose sight of success.

3

Principle 2: Fix Key Problems

If a change project is to be successful, it needs the full support of the agency's leadership, and the way to ensure that support is by addressing the problems that truly matter to the CEO.

Principle 3: Choose a Powerful Change leader

In a NIATx change project, a staff team works together to find solutions to the problems that are holding the organization back from its targeted aim. At the helm of this group is the change leader, who manages the team, runs the project's day-to-day operations, and serves as the liaison between the team and the organization's leadership. In this delicate position, the change leader must be many things to many people: she must have the CEO's ear, and be close enough to ask for and receive resources needed for the project; she must have the respect of her peers and subordinates; and she must possess leadership and motivational skills.

Principle 4: Get Ideas from Outside the Field

Developing innovative solutions to entrenched problems often requires looking beyond the boundaries of the familiar and shaking things up a bit. Looking at the practices of other industries is a way to push beyond these boundaries, and it's often there that you'll find the best ideas.

Principle 5: Use Rapid-Cycle Testing

NIATx change projects are structured around what we call "rapid-cycle" testing. Rapid-cycle testing consists of a series of change cycles conducted in quick succession. Change teams test potential changes to an existing process and evaluate the results using P(lan) D(o) S(tudy) A(ct) Cycles: Plan the change, Do the test, Study the results, and Act on your conclusions¹. The key is that these tests are conducted quickly, on a small scale, over a short period of time. Throughout, the change team collects data related to the targeted aim to measure progress. The data also helps the team to refine and retest a promising change on an incrementally larger scale before adopting it completely.

Rapid-Cycle Testing refers to a series of PDSA Cycles conducted in rapid succession. Change teams test potential changes to an existing process, evaluate the results, then adopt, adapt, or abandon the change.

NIATx is based on the premise of gradual improvement over time. Improvement isn't usually accomplished by one big change; it's a series of smaller changes, tested and implemented one at a time, that add up to a big impact.

4

The NIATx model works because:

- Short, small-scale tests are less disruptive to clients and staff, and are low-risk in the sense that little time and resources will be expended on trying out changes that quickly prove to be ineffective.
- Evaluating changes both quantitatively (through data measurement) and qualitatively (through team discussion of how the test went, and input from clients and staff) produces changes that both improve the targeted aim and can be feasibly implemented within the existing system.
- A new process can be perfected in repeated cycles before it is implemented on a full scale.
- The low-risk, no-commitment nature of quick tests encourages creative experimentation.
- Each cycle builds on the previous ones, as each cycle yields knowledge to apply in future tests.

Data collection may sound intimidating, but we purposefully encourage agencies to keep it simple. Done properly, data collection should be clarifying, not confusing. You'll find detailed instructions on how to establish measures and collect data in Chapter 7.

An Overview of the NIATx Model

Now that you've learned about some of the key concepts behind the NIATx model, we give a brief overview of the model itself so you can see those concepts in action.

Consider this an introduction—you'll learn about each component of the model in greater detail later in the book.

The Key Players

The executive sponsor: A member of the organization's top management (often the CEO) who makes a firm commitment to the change project, secures necessary resources, and helps guide the project.

The change leader: Chosen by the executive sponsor, the change leader directs the day-to-day operations of the change project, manages the team and keeps the executive sponsor informed of the team's progress.

The change team: A group of staff and clients or former clients from throughout the organization assembled by the executive sponsor to brainstorm potential changes and organize and carry out rapid-cycle tests—under the supervision of the change leader.

Steps in the NIATx Model

1. Define the Project: The executive sponsor (or the CEO, if not the same) chooses an aim to serve as the project objective. Sometimes it will be easy to identify which aim to focus on; in most cases, the executive sponsor may use the walk-through as a tool to understand where the agency's biggest problems lie.

2. Conduct a Walk-through: The walk-through is a valuable tool for gaining insight into your customers' needs and determining which of those needs are not being adequately met. During the walk-through, the executive sponsor (and possibly the change leader or another key project stakeholder) takes on the role of client and physically goes through every step that the typical client would, including the initial call for help, the assessment and/or intake process, and paperwork. The purpose of the walk-through is to get a new perspective on your organization's services by seeing them through the customer's eyes. Your observations may help you understand which aspects of your organization work for the customer, and which ones a change project could work to improve. The walk-through also solicits ideas and opinions from staff, adding yet another valuable perspective to the picture. You'll learn more about the walk-through in Chapter 4.

3. Define Improvement Measures and Collect Baseline Data: NIATx change projects are outcome-driven, which means that changes are evaluated in large part by whether they produce demonstrable, measurable improvement. Before starting a change project, then, the team must decide what criteria they will use to measure progress; i.e., which data will most accurately reflect performance levels with regard to the targeted aim. For example, for a

project aimed at reducing no-shows to assessments, the measurement might be the percentage of clients who fail to show up for a scheduled appointment.

Before beginning testing, the change team must measure the organization's current levels of performance, so that they can compare testing data to determine whether the change is producing an improvement. We call this pre-testing data baseline data, and it can also be used to set a numerical goal for the project (say, reducing the no-show rate from a baseline of 45 percent to 15 percent). Chapter 9 discussed data in greater detail.

4. Rapid-Cycle Testing: The bulk of the project is devoted to brainstorming process changes that could potentially improve the project's aim, and then using rapid-cycle testing on these changes—one change at a time—to check their effectiveness. As mentioned above, these “rapid-cycle” tests are conducted on a small scale, over a short period of time, in rapid succession. The team uses Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycles to implement the promising change on a small scale (maybe on only a handful of clients) for a short time (often a few days). During the test, the team collects data using the same method it used for collecting baseline data. At the end of the testing period, the team discusses how it went, evaluates the data, and decides how to proceed. If the change seems promising but didn't produce great results, the team can tweak and retest the change. This cycle of refinement continues until the process change yields maximal improvement, and all the kinks have been worked out. Once the team has perfected the change, it can be adopted across the organization.

6

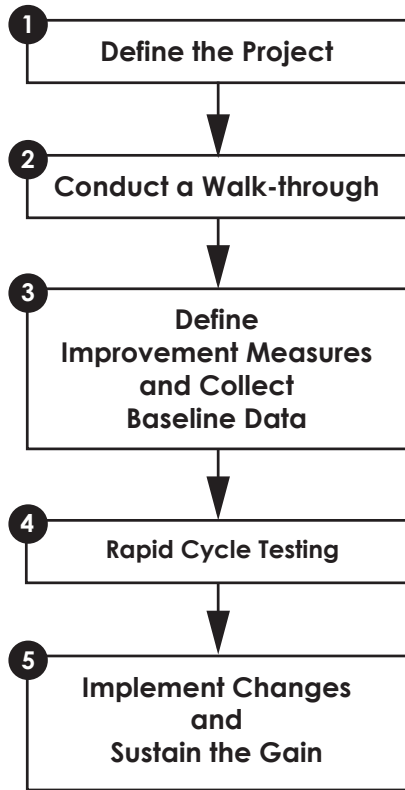
Alternatively, if a change being tested fails to yield improvement and doesn't seem promising or workable, the team may choose to abandon it and move on to the next rapid-cycle pilot test. Because pilot tests are so short and are done on a small scale, there is little risk involved and nothing is lost. A change team can learn a lot, however from a failed test.

NIATx recommends that change teams use a form like Change Project Form (see Chapter 5) to record their progress. You can also download this form and others from the Forms and Templates page of the NIATx website at www.niatx.net.

5. Implement Changes and Sustain the Gain: Once a change has undergone rapid-cycle testing, all the kinks have been worked out, and it has been adapted to fit neatly into the work system, it's implemented on a full scale. Staff are trained in the new procedure, written procedures are updated, and everyone in the organization is alerted to the change.

But while adopting a change is cause for celebration, it's not the end of the challenge. In fact, sustaining a change—ensuring the new process is properly carried out and that it continues to produce the improved outcome—requires as much effort as creating it. It's easy to slip back into the old way of doing things if you're not paying attention, so during the sustainability phase, the organization continues to monitor the process and measure outcomes in an effort to standardize the new process and assimilate it into the work system. During this phase, the key is to make it as easy as possible to use the new process, and as difficult as possible to go back to the old way of doing things.

The NIATx Model



A Culture of Continuous Improvement

Organizations use the NIATx model to make progress toward specific goals, but process improvement doesn't end with a single change project. The larger purpose of change projects is to create an organization-wide culture of continuous improvement.

This means celebrating accomplishments without becoming complacent. It means always thinking of what could be done better and, once you've accomplished that, how you could improve the process even more.

In an organization with a culture of continuous improvement, everyone is constantly thinking of creative, innovative solutions for improvement. It's a place where people are equipped with the knowledge and resources to conduct their own mini pilot tests or collect their own data. And it's a place where there is a company-wide commitment to making improvements stick.

A successful change project does more than increase admissions or reduce no-shows—it shows the organization’s leadership and staff that change is possible, that improvement is within reach, and that successful process change benefits everyone. In short, a successful change project engenders enthusiasm for more change and more improvement.

This is important because improvement is difficult in the face of disinterest from above (the CEO or other top leadership) and resistance from below (direct service employees). A successful project engages staff, soliciting their input and creating avenues to get everyone involved. Providing this opportunity for involvement serves to counteract the notion some staff may have that change is something to be feared, that it will have a negative impact on their work lives, that they have no say in what’s going to happen, or that their viewpoints aren’t being considered. Most people experience change in the workplace as bad because it is top-down, and often seems sudden and unexpected. Engaging staff and clients in the process of improving services makes change more dynamic and inclusive and reduces the elements of change that people have come to fear in the workplace.

Successful improvement projects change not only processes, they also change attitudes. They extinguish the idea that improvement is impossible, that change is daunting, and that frustrations and inefficiencies are an inescapable part of the business and nothing can be done about them. In the new way of thinking, everyone, from the CEO to the front desk staff, views obstacles as opportunities for improvement, and they’re willing to put in the work because they have confidence in the outcome.

8

The NIATx Community

Peer networking is an important part of our philosophy, and NIATx organizations experience the many benefits that accompany being a part of the community we have built. By connecting with the organizations using our model, we create opportunities for personalized support and guidance. Instead of giving an organization a NIATx manual and leaving it to carry out a change project on its own, we actively engage them by offering coaching, answering questions, and helping them overcome obstacles, and plan for the next steps.

Interactivity is key in the NIATx model, whether it’s between staff and change team members, change team leaders and NIATx coaches, or organizations. We facilitate this interactivity and network building in a variety of ways:

- **Learning Collaboratives:** During a learning collaborative, organizations come together to launch synchronized change projects. The members of the learning collaborative meet regularly along with a NIATx coach to learn about process improvement, and share their successes and challenges.
- **Coaching:** Organizations attempting change projects can receive individualized attention and guidance from a NIATx coach skilled in process improvement.

- Change Leader Academy: A special workshop for those interested in learning how to lead process improvement efforts.
- The NIATx website: Our website features a range of tools. We also host interactive forums and webinars on specific topics. (For more information, visit www.niatx.net)

The Business Case

As much as we focus on providing better care for clients, the financial side of running an agency can't be ignored. On the contrary, a strong financial footing provides the resources to offer quality care. A poor financial situation compromises the organization's ability to offer quality care and has a detrimental impact on working conditions and staff morale.

Improving the quality of care offered to your clients shouldn't mean sacrificing financial stability, and change projects that have a negative impact on finances are counterproductive to long-term improvement.

Because we understand these connections between care and business, we've made it a part of our mission to help organizations make changes that not only improve access and retention, but that also increase revenue and drive down costs. The NIATx model works because what is good for the clients is also good for the balance sheet. Our goals of getting more clients into treatment and keeping them there and maximizing efficiency and productivity align with putting the organization on surer financial footing².

NIATx Case Studies

Since NIATx began, we've worked with thousands of behavioral health treatment centers across the United States in a variety of ways—learning collaboratives, NIATx initiatives, coaching, conferences, and many others. Throughout this book, you'll find case studies from agencies that have used the NIATx model, and you'll learn about their experiences, their frustrations, what worked for them, and what didn't. We view every change project as a learning experience for the participants as well as other organizations. The NIATx website offers a growing inventory of success stories from organizations using the NIATx model to address a variety of issues—ranging from access to and retention in treatment to building their capacity to bill third-party payers.

How to Use this Book

This book is intended to provide both clear instruction and guidance on initiating a NIATx change project as well as to explain the background and key concepts that underlie the model. Agency leaders seeking to stage a process improvement project and anyone interested in learning about process improvement can use it as a guide.

We encourage you to read through the entire book before beginning your project to get a better sense of the context for each stage of the model, the preparation involved, and how the model works as a whole.