



What to Do When a Project Stalls

YFA Connections is a private independent nonprofit agency that has served the greater Spokane area with counseling and treatment programs for nearly 40 years. The agency offers outpatient and intensive outpatient treatment for chemical dependency through its STEPPS program, as well as treatment programs for co-occurring mental health and chemical dependency.

When YFA/STEPPS began its NIATx project in October 2007, the agency was experiencing high staff turnover. Staff vacancies resulted in increased caseloads and redistribution of treatment groups. With this staffing shortage, Change Leader Tom Murphy was unable to assemble a change team for the first NIATx change project.

Eager to get started with process improvement, Murphy conducted a walk-through of his agency's intake process. He called in to make appointment, completed intake paperwork, and attended both an individual session and a group session. He observed that the paperwork requirements were lengthy—and that not all of it had to be completed by a clinician.

Murphy wanted secure staff buy-in for process improvement by testing an easy change that he thought would have immediate success. Administrative staff would complete financial and demographic paperwork with the client. The counselor would be responsible for only the counseling-related paperwork.

"I thought that pulling the intake paperwork apart would help relieve time and paperwork burden on counselors," comments Murphy. "I also hypothesized that separating the admission assessment paperwork would reduce time to treatment and increase capacity."

Here's What We're Going to Do

Murphy completed change project form without seeking input from his staff members. He announced the change project at a staff meeting. From the management team's perspective, this seemed like a great change to test. Yet it soon became obvious that it wasn't working.

Staff members did not want to try the intervention. Counseling staff thought that it would reduce the time needed to engage with new clients—the exact opposite of the intended outcome. Because the idea had come from the "top down," the staff members most affected by the proposed change had not been consulted or engaged in the decision to try the new process.

Learning Opportunities Spark Enthusiasm

Murphy attended a NIATx workshop on his own. The agency staffing was still in flux, and he did not feel that YFA could not spare any other staff members to attend with him. "This didn't really allow for others to get inspired and motivated," Murphy explains. "

Support from the Executive Sponsor

After the agency's CEO Cathy Doran attended the following NIATx learning session, process improvement really started to take hold at YFA. "Our CEO came back fired up and as a result, everyone else got interested," says Murphy. Doran gained a better understanding of the importance of her role as Executive Sponsor. Murphy learned that support from the CEO is an essential ingredient for successful change projects.

Complete the Change Project Form as a Team

As staff vacancies were filled, Murphy was able to assemble a team. He'd learned from his first attempt at a change project that he needed to get all team members involved in the change project aims and design prior to implementation. "For the second change project, we completed the change project form as a team," he comments.

The second change project involved making reminder calls for intake appointments. While this intervention did not appear to reduce no-shows significantly, it did help team members learn to use data to measure the effectiveness of a change. "The NIATx process started to become part of our culture," says Murphy.

NIATx Tools to the Rescue

Murphy looks to the NIATx web site for ideas, strategies, and promising practices to test. He cites the Nominal Group Technique as especially helpful for getting teams unstuck. "It allows everyone to contribute ideas and feel invested in the project.'

Persistence Pays Off

Murphy remembers feeling that NIATx just wasn't going to work at YFA after his first attempts fell short of his expectations. But Murphy and CEO Doran made the decision to keep it up for just a bit longer, with great results. "I needed to step back, go back to the NIATx model, and refocus," says Murphy. "Getting staff members and our CEO involved and excited through the learning session was key, as was a team approach to identifying our change project goals."