

Improvement Cymru Academy Toolkit Guide



Culture of Continuous Improvement

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Introduction

Culture is essentially an organisations personality and character (Chartered Management Institute, 2015). It is a system of shared beliefs, values, and assumptions about how people should interact and behave, how decisions should be made and how work should be executed. A culture of continuous improvement is a culture where all people working within the organisation, have a shared purpose that involves looking for ways to enhance the processes and systems that they work within. It is a belief that what is good today may not be good enough tomorrow. This culture is embedded within healthcare. From a clinical viewpoint when professionals work to guidelines and procedures that work from evidence-based practice, acknowledging the need to complete continuing professional development because there may be better medications, treatments or change in guidelines that should be followed. This culture needs to transition into other areas of healthcare, including operational aspects of healthcare where we need to continually look for ways to improve the processes and systems for service delivery using evidence for an everchanging healthcare landscape.

The Institute of Healthcare Improvement (IHI) has a framework which can be used to promote a culture of continuous improvement.

Institute of Healthcare Improvement: A Framework for Safe, Reliable and Effective Care

The Institute of Healthcare Improvement (2017) released a framework for healthcare organisations called a Framework for Safe, Reliable and Effective Care. The framework has two foundations, and nine elements see diagram One. Engagement from patients and families is the driving force behind the framework. Each of the nine elements help support organisations to promote a culture of continuous improvement.



Diagram one: A Framework for Safe, Reliable and Effective Care (Institute of Healthcare Improvement, 2017)

Rationale

A culture of continuous improvement is important for long term success and growth. There are several benefits for having a culture of continuous improvement.

1. Increases Staff Engagement and Staff Retention

Employees that work in an environment where they are encouraged to contribute ideas, learn from mistakes, and actively participate and engage with improving process are more committed to their work. This type of culture gives staff a sense of ownership and they become invested in the organisation's success.

2. Increases patient satisfaction.

When organisations have a culture of continuous improvement, they are more likely to meet patient needs by continually improving services and processes.

3. Improves efficiency and productivity.

A culture of continuous improvement will enable staff to regularly refine their processes, which will help to identify inefficiencies and wastes. By streamlining processes and eliminating wastes, organisations can achieve greater productivity.

Background

The concept of having a culture of continuous improvement originated in Japan after World War Two. During this period, significant changes needed to take place which led to the development of ideas that emphasised the need for ongoing improvement. The term 'Kaizen' emerged as a central concept of continuous improvement (see our [Kaizen Toolkit Guide here](#) for more Information). Another key aspect of developing continuous improvement was the work carried out by William Edwards Deming. His work emphasised the need for reviewing and improving processes. This influenced the modern concept that today is known as continuous improvement.

When do you need a Culture of Continuous Improvement

You would want to embed and sustain a culture of continuous improvement in all aspects of healthcare to enhance the quality of services that you provide and improve patient safety. Embedding a Culture of continuous Improvement also helps to make processes more efficient, reducing wastes that also help save time and resources. Staff and patient satisfaction will also be improved.

How to create a Culture of Continuous Improvement

Creating a culture of continuous improvement takes hard work and effort. There are several things you can do to create a culture of continuous improvement.

Lead by Example:

Leading by example is crucial for creating a culture of continuous improvement. When Senior Managers embrace this culture, it sets the tone for the organisation. Leading by example is not just for senior managers but for everyone at all levels of an organisation. It is important to model behaviour that you want to see from your colleagues.

Encourage Open Communication:

Encourage the team to speak up and share their thoughts without fear of judgement or retribution. This will encourage staff to raise concerns or problems, in order to improve processes and services.

Provide feedback:

Provide honest feedback both positive and negative feedback but within a constructive way. This will help to improve performance and enable people to feel more confident about their abilities.

Recognition and Reward:

It is important to recognise and appreciate staff and departments/wards who undertake improvement work. This will make staff feel they are part of a team. Recognition and rewards should be linked with improvement work.

Promote inclusivity:

Making people feel valued and included will encourage staff to make contributions to improving services. They will feel heard and valued. Everyone should be included in improving services. Having a diverse team will enable different perspectives to be considered.

Take a low-key approach:

Taking a low-key approach and making small changes to improve culture is more effective than announcing a change during a meeting or work event. Making grand gestures and big announcements can cause more chaos and uncertainty than excitement.

Encourage collaboration:

Encourage team members to work together and collaborate on projects. This can help build trust within the team and promote improvement work.

Clear Vision and Purpose:

Establishing a clear vision and purpose emphasises the importance of continuous improvement. When creating a clear purpose align this vision with the overall goals of the organisation.

Measurement:

Measurement is a key aspect of creating a culture of continuous improvement. Having measurement allows you to know your current status, see the impact of your change ideas and allow you to measure how sustainable the changes are. Using

data for improvement can allow you to share failures and successes, facilitating learning and continuous improvement to take place. You can then celebrate success – no matter how small! This builds confidence and a positive team culture.

Continuous Learning:

For continuous improvement, you need to promote a learning mindset where we use all types of data for learning and not to judge staff, departments/wards and hospitals. By making the shift from judgment to learning will encourage staff to gain knowledge, learn from failures and adapt to change. It then will allow you to share good practice and lessons you have learned across teams.

What Next?

If you want to create a culture for continuous improvement, learning and training is required to give staff the skills and capability to be able to embed this culture in practice and allow them to have the knowledge to continually improve the processes and systems in which they work.

Helpful tips

To embed a culture of continuous improvement, staff at all levels need to support and champion continuous improvement. Establishing a culture of continuous improvement requires staff to have a shared purpose and clear vision of what continuous improvement means for the organisation. Another framework called Toyota Kata can also be utilised to promote a culture of continuous improvement (see our [Toyota Kata Toolkit Guide here](#) for more information).

Additional Resources

If you are interested in learning more about how improvement practices can benefit your workplace, we offer a range of training courses. Visit our website for more information. <https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/improvement-cymru/improvement-cymru-academy/> or email us improvementcymruacademy@wales.nhs.uk to find about the improvement courses we offer.

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