

9 Elements of a Person-Centered System: Quality Management

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Quality Management, the eighth element of a person-centered system, plays an important role in demonstrating the impact of all the previous elements. Each of the 9 Elements of a Person-Centered System are important individually, and together they make up a strong system that can withstand time and external pressures. In quality management systems, agencies have an opportunity to create measurements that make all the elements tangible, visible and improvable.

This is a different approach from typical human service systems, which primarily focus on quality assurance (meeting a set of minimum standards) and in some cases quality control (making sure a certain level of quality assurance is always met). To establish and maintain a person-centered system, it is also necessary introduce quality improvement and performance excellence to the entire approach to quality. In short, quality assurance and control are linked to compliance with minimum standards. They are not designed to wow anyone, or to create significant customer satisfaction. They are the floor, not the ceiling, in high quality service delivery. Quality improvement goes further. It is a continuous effort to identify, understand and act on opportunities to do better. Quality improvement is a mindset of capability just as person-centered thinking is a mindset of capability. A comprehensive quality management system takes a both/and approach: implementing processes to ensure minimum standards are met AND implementing structured methods to seek opportunities to improve, learn and evolve beyond the minimum.

A simple definition of a system, based on Russel Ackoff's original *Systems Theory*, might be, "a collection of three or more interdependent parts with a shared purpose, whose individual parts do not fully meet their maximum capabilities without interacting with other parts." For example, service provider agencies, service coordination or case management agencies, licensing agencies, and intake/eligibility/assessment agencies are all parts of the same system. As a system, these separate parts are more effective when they work efficiently with one another. Ensuring that the separate parts work together using quality management strategies is a key role of leaders.



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Successful transformation to a person-centered system requires an effective quality management strategy. Leaders understand the importance of using quality management activities to ensure the interaction of all parts of the system. For example, how long and seamless is the referral from an intake agency to a service coordination agency? How accurate is the relay of person-centered information from a service provider to a case management agency when a person asks for changes in their service plan? How satisfied are people with their current services, and not simply the day-to-day service delivery, but also whether or not the services match their desired goals from the start? Without an intentional quality management system, changes remain at simply the transactional level and fall short of the desired goal of system transformation.

Transactional changes alter the status quo one step at a time, and while this is important, it is not sufficient to change the whole system. Such improvements can have greater impact when they are consistently applied. Changing transactions—for example using person-centered questions in assessments—must be anchored to the agency’s overall vision and values and are more powerful when also linked to a person-centered plan and consistent with changes in service monitoring methods. When transactional changes occur without aligning to the agency’s vision, values and goals, the door is opened for blame culture to take root. If one part of the agency changes the timing and depth of its assessment process without aligning with the monitoring process, people may end up being asked the same questions repeatedly, or worse, may be given contradicting information. While these changes may improve the separate assessment and monitoring processes, it will also create frustration and wasted time for both the people supported and the staff who collect and record the information. A quality management system that has been designed to take all aspects of service access and delivery into account can use both fact-based (timeliness, accuracy) and perception-based (satisfaction, personal experience, and recommendations) measurements. Using both types of measurement across all parts of the system will show alignment or gaps in actual implementation.

Transactional changes address one specific task or activity, or one small part of a larger process. Changes made to one single interaction point between people can have positive although limited impact on its own.

Transformational change impacts the whole of the organization. Changes of this type transform the entire system or organization to a new way of existing or doing business. For changes to be transformational, they must be carried out in concert with one another, with clear feedback from the people effected by the changes, and aligned with a clear set of agency vision, values, and goals.

For discreet transactional changes to be transformational, they must be carried out in concert with the overarching strategy to move forward as a first step. Additionally, transformational change requires clear feedback from the people affected by the changes and alignment with a clear set of agency vision, values, and goals. Transforming from an agency-centered or service-centered organization to a person-centered organization requires clear and specific goals that drive improvement opportunities. Transformational changes of this nature provide intrinsic motivation and have the power to sustain change because they align with both organizational and personal values. Employees and people supported by your agency will see the changes as improvements that are responsive to their input. This is where quality links directly to another of the 9 Elements of a Person-Centered System: supporting the workforce.

Employees want to work for organizations that do "good work." People take pride in their work; when they see measures and reports that routinely demonstrate their work is important, they see their own contributions. When employees know their efforts and the overall success of their agency is more than just compliant with rules or minimally meeting expectations, they gain a sense of satisfaction and feel valued. That's not to say measures of quality are the only thing that matters to employees. However, one key factor in a person-centered system that can also be measured in your quality system is how your agency communicates workforce value to your employees.

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Similar to person-centered thinking and practices, quality management is a value-based skill set. Structured trainings and approaches build skill and competency. Just as you want the leaders of a person-centered system to be knowledgeable and skilled in person-centered thinking, it is also necessary that the people leading the quality management effort have formal training and skills in the mindset and the practices associated with quality improvement.

The presence of a great quality management system will accelerate positive change, reduce ineffective efforts, increase staff engagement, and support healthy organizational culture - all distinct yet interdependent parts of a person-centered system.

The typical approach to quality management has been to look at the processes used within the system to ensure timelines are met, complete and accurate documentation is present, strategies and goals are accomplished, and health and safety standards have been met. This focus has met a set of minimum standards but has been insufficient for people who need the system's support to obtain the life they desire. A shift is needed to also measure if the person's desires and expectations are met within the processes used and measured, and to continuously seek to improve those processes.

Searching for opportunities for improvement replaces fault-finding and blame culture with an intentional effort to learn. And key to this mindset is a belief that improvements stem from faulty process design, or faulty environments or infrastructure, not faulty people. This doesn't suggest a removal of accountability; it recognizes that accountability is the baseline, and there is always space to apply our learning to our rules, procedures, processes, assumptions, forms, documents, etc. Quality improvement requires the courage to always ask "how can we do better" and apply ingenuity and innovation to our answers.

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