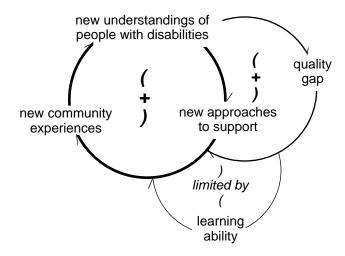# Action Learning for Quality Improvement

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Most business approaches to quality improvement assume a stable process and long term decisions, external to the quality improvement process, about the goals, strategy, and structure of the organization. Typical quality improvement tools do not contemplate frequent redefinitions of the nature and direction of work because they are tools for making things well or tools for dealing effectively with large numbers of brief, routine service episodes. Indeed, the fundamental insight which triggered successive waves of life improvement for people with disabilities over the past twenty years calls most management approaches into question. This insight –that people with disabilities are whole people first, entitled to respectful personal relationships with those who assist them– contradicts organizational processes which cast people into impersonal roles, such as the roles of client or customer. The search for better quality supports for people with developmental disabilities requires new forms of organization and the invention of the tools to create them collaboratively with the people who benefit from continuously improving support.

Today, more than ever before, people with developmental disabilities rely on the capacity for rapid and fundamental learning by the people who serve them. A virtuous circle of new understandings of people with disabilities, new approaches to support, and new community experiences creates an enduring gap between common practice and best practice. Some professionals are begining to understand disability as defined by the community opportunities and supports available to a person (as reflected, for example, in the American Association on Mental Retardation's current re-definition of mental retardation). This understanding encourages a search for better ways to support people as community members at school, at work, and at home. New forms of support create new community experiences, whose positive and negative aspects close the circle by stimulating better understanding. Each turn of the circle renews the quality gap and creates a continuing demand for agency development.

As long as there is more to learn about creating opportunities for people with disabilities, quality improvement efforts don't stop with the attainment of a stable state. Instead, quality is limited by agency ability to promote learning through collaborative efforts among people with disabilities and their families and friends, community members, and agency staff.

   Because this cycle of learning begins and ends with new understanding of people with disabilities as community members, agencies regularly meet the challenge of learning to do significantly different things rather than just continuously improving stable processes. Within the past seven years, agencies offering day services have had to decide how much to invest in supported employment; agencies that adopted group approaches to supported employment have had to decide how much to re-invest in support to individual jobs; agencies that deployed individual job coaches have had to decide how to re-organize to increase co-worker support; and agencies committed to maximizing natural support have had to re-think their approach to job development and support in order to increase employer ownership of the entire process of including workers with significant disabilities. At each decision point, agencies face changes in what work their staff do and why they do it, as well as changes in how, where, and when they work.

   Since 1985, we have been involved in developing collaborative approaches to quality improvement. With several colleagues, we have worked with almost 100 groups of people on a series of intensive action learning workshops called *Framework For Accomplishment*. Our shared goal is to develop processes and concepts useful in re-designing services which honor the distinctive contributions of people with disabilities,their family members and friends, service workers, and other community members. Our process is conversational: instead of assuming that outsiders gain a privileged view of truth by applying checklists of quality indicators, we assume that outsiders can contribute to quality improvement by gathering different perspectives, and then creating, sharing, and testing narrative accounts which communicate the quality gap between current reality and a desirable future. Our method is to invite people with disabilities, their families, friends, and service workers to collaborate with self-managed teams whose tasks include: 1) creating an individual profile of each person's current experiences and desired future and determining what is most important now for each person; 2) describing current service practices from each person's point of view and identifying key capacities the agency needs to develop in order to be of

better assistance to the people they support; and 3) identifying possibilities for constructive action which make creative use of personal and agency resources in each individual situation.

   This action learning approach contributes to organizational learning by opening a temporary space which encourages reflection and creative problem solving around the improvement circle. Beginning with description of people's current experiences, current understanding of desirable futures, and current supports, the process increases awareness of the quality gap by raising the possibility that there are different ways to think about and different ways to use available resources in service of a better understanding of the person.Continuing refinement of this approach suggests several ideas of use in the design of quality assurance tools. Effective quality improvement efforts:

• Include people with disabilities and their families and friends as full collaborators in the process. Seven year's experience with Framework demonstrates that many people with disabilities are enthusiastic participants in inquiries about improving the quality of their lives. A person's apparent ability with language or behavioral challenges seem to make much less difference to the quality of their participation than the respect with which they are invited into the process and the respect with which they are treated within it.

• Strengthen the voices of direct service staff. Many who work on a day to day basis with people with disabilities have untapped good ideas and problem solving skills which will not emerge if a quality improvement process assumes that they are ignorant and untrustworthy.

• Make people accountable for clear judgements about the quality of current experience and the opportunities for improvement. Framework participants have found the focused but open ended nature of its questions challenging and interesting. As one person put it, "There are no papers to hide behind. You have to say what you think and then listen and respond to what people say back."

• Clarify purpose. Framework asks people to explore three purposes for services to people who require long term assistance: 1) Actively help people discover and move toward a desirable personal future; 2) Offer necessary assistance in ways the offers positive experiences of community membership; and 3) Challenge and build the competence of community settings.

• Challenge agency staff to learn how to improve their abilities to listen to people with disabilities, to develop community opportunities, to assist people to make and keep positive community connections, and to be a safeguard for people in difficult times.

   Like any approach that constructs a temporary social system to accelerate learning, the effectiveness of Framework depends on people's ability to move its lessons from the stage

of reflection back into action. This has proven particularly difficult when closing the quality gap calls on agencies to transform the ways they work and the ways they are managed.

For more information, see

O'Brien, J. (1989). What's worth working for? Leadership for quality in human services. In V. Bradley & H. Bersani (Eds.). *Quality assurance: New answers to old questions*. Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishing Co.