

Best Practice

Performance Improvement

—the Advisory Board Way

Performance improvement seems simple at first: identify a problem, then take steps to solve it. But organisations often tell us their change initiatives struggle to get off the ground. We've reviewed years of Advisory Board research to understand why improvement projects typically fail—and to identify the **eight steps crucial to any successful change initiative**. A summary of our findings is below.

PITFALL 1: Lack of Leadership Attention

By far the biggest barrier to successful performance improvement is inadequate oversight and accountability. Clinical staff, especially doctors, lack the time to focus on anything beyond their daily responsibilities, while those pushing for change lack the political capital to make the initiative a higher priority. As a result, the change initiative never truly gets the attention it needs.

Secure Dedicated Leadership

- For every project, enlist support from an executive sponsor who can ensure the work gets adequate attention, clear other barriers
- Give project leaders enough time to focus on the initiative, even if doing so requires job re-scoping or additional resources



1 Aggressively Prioritise Opportunities

- To avoid overtaxing resources, pursue only the most valuable performance improvement projects
- Articulate clear criteria for chosen improvement initiatives



TIP FOR SUCCESS

When seeking an executive sponsor, don't limit your search to those with an official leadership role. Sponsors need not have a formal leadership title as long as they have sufficient political capital to overcome cultural or resource barriers to change. Think of the word "executive" as more symbolic than literal.

PITFALL 2: Poor Work Planning

Even with dedicated leadership, projects may fail because they are inadequately scoped and managed. Improvement efforts target areas that have no real impact on the problem, performance goals are unreasonable, and meetings occur too infrequently for real action.

Commit to Workplan and Goals

- Select measurable, realistic metrics to define success for the change initiative
- Establish—and adhere to—a formal workplan to guide project from start to finish



3 Identify True Root Causes

- Systematically assess how current processes fall short of best practice before creating new protocols
- Conduct formal root cause analysis to determine what process gaps warrant the most attention



TIP FOR SUCCESS

Root cause analysis often yields multiple solutions to a performance problem. Consider prioritising some easy wins up front to gain momentum and saving more challenging changes until later in the initiative, when infrastructure and credibility have been established.

PITFALL 3: Rocky Rollout

While planning and preparation are the hardest parts of performance improvement, organisations can't forget the implementation stage either. Even the best-planned change initiative will meet with resistance (and potential demise) if stakeholders are leery of new processes and protocols.

Stage a Smart Rollout

- Decide between simultaneous rollout to all stakeholders versus a phased pilot
- If piloting, select early-stage sites strategically to generate early wins, ameliorate concerns about change



5 Effectively Communicate the Change

- Incorporate communication planning into every change initiative, no matter how small
- Use both mass and individual communication to explain rationale for change, highlight benefits, and neutralise negativity



TIP FOR SUCCESS

While communication about change initiatives is essential, be careful not to overwhelm clinicians and staff who are already inundated with information. Create a "communication hierarchy" to ensure that only the most important information is communicated through "push" channels such as email or the EMR. Reserve details for "passive" channels such as an intranet page or posters.

PITFALL 4: Insufficient Follow-Up

Finally, organisations must not assume the work stops with implementation. Without structures in place to monitor ongoing performance, measure success, and identify future improvement needs, the initiative will ultimately fail to have its desired impact on outcomes.

Adjust as Needed

- After initial rollout of new processes and protocols, continue to monitor performance data at regular intervals
- Establish mechanisms to collect stakeholder suggestions for additional improvements



7 Hold All Stakeholders Accountable

- Develop accountability measures for stakeholders from the executive suite to the front lines—even those whose impact on outcomes is only indirect
- Use a mix of informal mechanisms (e.g., data sharing) and, if needed, more formal measures (e.g., financial incentives) to maintain performance growth over the long term



TIP FOR SUCCESS

Consider holding stakeholders responsible for group as well as individual performance, which fosters a powerful sense of shared accountability and allows the organisation to recognise the contribution of individuals whose impact on outcomes is real but indirect.