

If Unique Is What You Seek, Use Teams for Continuous Quality Improvement

By Dr. Yvonne Simmons Howze

Today, emphasis on quality has become as much an issue for the public sector as it is for the private sector. For many not-for-profit organizations, this emphasis has meant a mere rededication to their existing mission, while for others it has meant a complete overhaul of the organization's entire service delivery system.

Several techniques are being employed within organizations to help identify and set new goals and directions, and to mobilize resources for improved operations. One technique that works exceptionally well to help organizations build capacity is the use of improvement teams. Improvement teams are unique in several ways as indicated by the information provided below.

Teaming is a process that requires a high level of commitment from a group of people who have a shared vision and a vested interest in a particular project. Improvement teams are typically created when a new endeavor is being developed or when a process is in place that is not working effectively. Thus, there are usually two types of teams: a project team (for addressing new initiatives) and a process team (for improving existing processes). For example, a project team might work on developing strategies for creating a parent-to-parent network and a process team might be established to update an existing procedural manual. Teams can be cross-functional with representatives from various departments, community organizations, businesses, etc., or they can be departmental whereby members are co-workers working for the same department head or manager.

At a minimum, each team should have a Quality Advisor, a Team Leader, a Scribe, and a Timekeeper. The Quality Advisor is the person (usually a supervisor or manager) who determines the need for the team based on organizational initiatives, identifies what the issues are that the team is to address, and helps to select those who will serve on the team. Teams should be comprised of about 5-7 persons. Volunteers are often easy to find if the team's purpose is clear, and if there are guarantees that the team's meeting schedule will be adhered to. The Team Leader is the facilitator of the group; not a committee chair. The Team Leader's role is to set and send out an agenda prior to the team's meeting, to ensure that the meeting starts and finishes on time, and to encourage the team to stay focused on the team's primary outcome(s). The Scribe is responsible for taking and distributing notes to team members, and the Timekeeper keeps the team on task according to the designated time allotted for the meeting.

It is highly recommended that each team complete a Team Charter similar to the one provided in Figure 1.0.

Team Charter

The Team Charter form is used for project and process teams assigned to work on specific problems, concerns, etc. This form should be filled out at the team's first meeting, and reviewed each time the team meets. (Project = new; Process = existing)

This team is a project/process team: _____
 Problem the team is to study:

Data that led to selection of this problem as a team activity:

Outcomes for this assignment:

The Quality Advisor/Sponsor is: _____ The Team Leader is: _____
 The Scribe is: _____ The Timekeeper is: _____
 The Team Members are:

The Team will meet: _____ Meeting location: _____
 The first meeting will be held on: _____ to clarify and negotiate goals.
 The team's assignment will begin: _____
 The team's target completion date is: _____
 Decision-making authority granted to the team includes:

Training to be provided to the team includes:

Priority for the team's work in relation to their normal workload: ___ High ___ Low ___ N/A
 Signatures of Team Members:

Date: _____

Figure 1.0

The Team Charter details what type of team is being created, what data led to the establishment of the team, the timeline under which the team is to operate, and the team's level of authority. At the first meeting, each member is required to sign the Charter to indicate a commitment to the teaming process. The Team Leader is the conduit between the team and the Quality Advisor, and keeps the Quality Advisor updated about the team's progress. Unless the team experiences difficulty (e.g., consistently absent team members, issues cannot be resolved, team needs to clarify and verify its purpose, etc.), the Quality Advisor does not meet with the team after the first meeting to 'kickoff' the Charter.

At least three days prior to the meeting, the Team Leader should send out notification reminders about the meeting and a tentative agenda. The agenda should specify time of meeting, location, and purpose. Other items that should be stated on the agenda are:

1. Review of the Team Charter
2. Status Reports on Active Items/Assignment from the last meeting
3. Topics to be discussed/issues to be decided upon with an estimated amount of time to be designated for each topic/issue
4. Meeting evaluation

An Action Register specifying who, will do what, by when, can be created and shared with each team member

at the end of each meeting so that tasks are clear. Teams should meet at least 4 times to address the problem, but once the team has met its established outcome(s), it can and should dismantle itself. The last meeting of the team should be a celebration that recognizes the work of the team and its completion of the assignment.

Plus/Delta Evaluation

+	Δ
I liked...	I wish...

Figure 2.0

Each team should evaluate its effectiveness in staying on task. There are several ways to do this, but one that works well is known as a Plus/Delta as indicated by Figure 2.0 above. The Plus/Delta evaluation is an open-ended evaluation whereby team members complete the following sentences: I liked (+) and I wish (Δ). This type of evaluation is intended to help the Team Leader understand how well the team is working together and to determine what corrective action needs to be taken for the next meeting. Another evaluation that works well is a 1-5 Likert rating scale whereby participants determine how well the group functioned as a whole to start and finish on time, to keep the interaction flowing, and to ensure individual assignments were completed. A sample form is provided in Figure 3.0 which can be used to evaluate the group's overall effectiveness.

Team Meeting Evaluation

Rank meeting quality on a scale of 1-5 for each area.

Meeting started on time	5...4...3...2...1	Meeting started late
Members were on time	5...4...3...2...1	Members were late
Agenda was followed	5...4...3...2...1	Members not focused
Full participation by all	5...4...3...2...1	One or two persons dominated
Lively discussions	5...4...3...2...1	Boring discussions
Task(s) accomplished	5...4...3...2...1	Unfinished task(s)
Meeting ended on time	5...4...3...2...1	Meeting ended late

Figure 3.0

Teams are one of the best ways to move a project from the idea stage to completion, by involving others in the decision-making process. However, in order to be highly productive, it is necessary that team members are given ample time to work on team assignments and release time to attend meetings. The Team Leader's final duty is to report the team's conclusions and recommendations to the Quality Advisor who then becomes responsible for integrating the team's recommendations into the organization's overall planning process. Thus, in their own unique way, teams ensure movement and continuous improvement!

Dr. Yvonne Simmons Howze is Director of Outreach Services at the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind. She is also President of CYA Associates, Inc., a company specializing in executive coaching, leadership development, and program evaluation and research.