



The 5 Key Principles

Studies have found that only five factors consistently make a difference in successfully overcoming barriers to process improvement. These five principles guide the NIATx model of organizational improvement.

- 1. Understand and Involve the Customer**
- 2. Fix Key Problems (and help the CEO sleep at night)**
- 3. Pick a Powerful Change Leader**
- 4. Get Ideas from Outside the Organization/Field**
- 5. Use Rapid Cycle Testing**

1. Understand and Involve the Customer

Taking the time to involve customers, getting their reactions to and advice about improvements, and preparing them for anticipated changes, helps treatment agencies understand and involve their customers. Walking through the processes of treatment—from the first call for help, to the intake process, and through final discharge—from the *customer's perspective* is the most useful way to understand how the customer feels and know how processes can be improved to serve them better. Organizations attuned to their customers are more likely to:

- Assume they do NOT know what their customers need and, therefore, actively involve the customer in the development of their improvement.
- Make sure that the improvement is noticeable to the customer and that it will meet one of the customer's key needs.
- Survey customers on a regular basis.
- Educate customers about new improvements.

2. Fix Key Problems (and help the CEO sleep at night)

What is keeping the executive director awake at night? If the improvement project is linked to key problems that trouble the CEO, then the project can gain the necessary support of leadership. Specific issues may vary, but all improvement projects need to be linked to a goal of the organization. Then every improvement project selected moves the organization one step closer to that goal.

3. Pick a Powerful Change Leader

The change leader must have internal respect and authority, as well as time to dedicate to necessary improvement activities. Making improvement part of the organizational culture requires that top leadership demonstrate commitment to the goals, process and results. The change agent needs to have so much respect and influence in the organization that her or she knows the CEO's home phone number by heart and is not afraid to use it to call at 10 p.m.

4. Get Ideas from Outside the Organization/Field

There is tremendous value for treatment organization in looking at booking, engaging, scheduling, production, and business practices in other fields. For example, looking at how the hospitality industry engages and schedules customers reveals many principles that stimulate ideas. Organizations that go outside their own boundaries to get ideas learn from others' successes and failures and find new and innovative ideas.

5. Use Rapid Cycle Testing

The idea behind rapid cycle improvement is to first try a change idea on a small scale to see how it works, and then modify it and try it again until it works very well for staff and customers. Then, and only then, does a change become a permanent improvement.

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