Writing a Problem Statement – Instruction

What Is a Problem Statement?

A problem statement is one or two sentences that identifies and summarizes a condition, problem, or issue that a quality improvement team is seeking to address. Typically included in a Project Charter, a problem statement provides a quality improvement team with an articulate expression of what they are setting out to achieve.

However, before a problem statement can be written there needs to be an understanding of the difference between the symptoms of a problem and an actual problem. Symptoms are typically the only indication that there is a problem. Symptoms are the shadows of underlying problems; the evidence by which a problem affects staff and makes itself known. In other words, a symptom is not a problem, but rather the outcome of an actual problem. A problem can be defined as the gap between the existing state and the desired state of a process.

Writing a Problem Statement

To write a problem statement, answer the following questions and develop your one or two sentence statement from the answers.

Questions	**Example Responses**
What is the problem?	Check sheets are not being completed
Who does this affect?	Registered nurses
How does this problem make you feel?	Frustrated, stressed
When is it a problem?	Every time the day shift nurses sit down to do their reporting
Why should I care?	When the check sheets are not completed the nurses have to spend time searching for the information
How does it affect the customer?	When the nurses don't have the information they have to search for it which takes away time that they could be spending with patients

As the quality improvement team is brainstorming and answering the questions in the first column, write down any key words. Write the first draft of the statement describing the current state using the information you gathered. Thus, the example's problem statement would be as follows:

Day shift nurses are frustrated when they to do their charting because they often have to search for information that should be on the check sheets. This takes time away from patients.

Tips for Writing a Problem Statement

- Look for the problem, not the solutions
- Focus on one problem
- Keep the statement to one or two sentences
- Ensure you can distinguish between symptoms and problems. An effective method for doing this is to use the 5 Whys tool

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