Sustainability Planner – Instruction Sheet and Tool

Why use a Sustainability Planner?

An important part of the improvement journey is planning how you are going to sustain your improvement efforts. The beneficial results of an improvement project have been sustained when the new ways of working have become the norm, or when things have not returned to the old way of doing things after a year. In order to ensure that an improvement is sustained, the changes made need continuously improve, evolve and adapt to both internal and external pressures.

The Sustainability Planner encourages quality improvement teams to think about the seven key factors that will help practices sustain the improvements that they have made. These seven factors are:

1) Clarify what you are sustaining
2) Engage leaders
3) Involve and support front-line staff
4) Communicate the benefits of the improved process
5) Ensure the change is ready to be implemented and sustained
6) Embed the improved process
7) Build in ongoing measurement

The seven key factors for success are discussed below. For each factor, a set of ideas to consider has been provided, as has a small area for your team to plan your next steps. Although not all of the ideas provided will be applicable to your practice, the more ideas that are considered, the higher the chances of successful sustainability.

How do I consider the key factors for success?

Clarify what you are sustaining

It is necessary that the entire team agrees upon what is being sustained. Is your team planning on sustaining a specific change idea, such as max packing patient visits to do as much as possible with the patient at each visit? Or is the team trying to sustain a change concept, such as reducing demand for visits through a number of different change ideas.

We are planning to sustain:

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Engage leaders

Research and experience demonstrate that the support of organizational leadership is essential to successful quality improvement work. Clinical and administrative leaders who work directly on, or indirectly support, the improvement project must ensure that all barriers to success are removed and project priorities are clearly identified and communicated.

Think about who needs to be on-side for changes to happen. Think about who ultimately influences whether or not something happens - these are the leaders within your practice/clinic. For small offices, the leaders may be everyone who works in the office (e.g., physicians/NPs, RN and receptionist).

Ideas to consider

- A provider champion (physician and/or NP), has been identified and has agreed to participate in the improvement efforts.
- The provider champion has devoted time to dialogue with and participate as a member of the improvement team.
- If applicable, your business manager or executive director has agreed to support the improvement efforts.
- Leaders have the skills/knowledge required to support successful implementation.
- Leaders have removed barriers or threats to facilitate process improvement.
- Leaders are able to clearly articulate the benefits of the improvement project such as: improved access to care, patient safety, improved patient experience and/or increased staff skills.
- Leaders have provided the required resources to ensure the changes are sustained (e.g., time for staff to incorporate the changes into day to day operations).

Next steps

To strengthen leadership engagement, we will:

Involve and support front-line staff

Front-line staff members play an important role throughout every quality improvement initiative. In the early phases of a project, they may be involved in identifying problem areas and solutions to test. Later, they may be involved in identifying training needs and delivering / receiving training themselves. Continual support and evaluation of the needs of those working within changed processes is necessary to ensure that changes are sustained.

Ideas to consider

- Staff members were provided with information about the purpose and significance of the improvement initiative.
- Front-line staff helped to identify issues from their perspective.
- Front-line staff members have been involved in developing solutions.
- The 'right' (most appropriate or qualified) staff are involved in the improvement project.
- Methods to regularly communicate with staff other than those directly working on the improvement team have been identified and used.
- A plan to address future skills and training needs has been created.

Next steps

To strengthen the involvement of front-line staff, we will:

Communicate the benefits of the improved process

Changes should address the root causes of problems and produce measurable benefits that meet the needs of all stakeholders (i.e., patients, front-line staff, providers, and leaders). Each stakeholder should be able to determine what benefits the changes bring to him or her.

Ideas to consider

- Unique and targeted 'what's in it for me' characteristics have been communicated to different stakeholders.
- Baseline data and ongoing real-time data for the measures is being collected regularly, tracked on a run chart and shared.
- Stories, updates at staff meetings and a visual display of data have been shared.
- Information about the improvement (i.e., patient outcomes, improved efficiencies, how the improvement efforts have been able to reduce or eliminate duplication of effort, unnecessary or repetitive work, unreliable processes, or excessive waits or delays) have been shared with stakeholders as the new way of work.

Next steps

To communicate the benefits of change, we will:

Ensure the change is ready to be implemented and sustained

If your improvement team has not finished testing their change ideas through PDSA cycles, then it is too early to consider full implementation and sustainability. Similarly, if the change is perceived as an additional duty or task, then the improvement is unlikely to be integrated into the clinic's culture or become 'the way things are done'. It is important to ensure that the change idea is effective and beneficial before moving to the implementation/sustainability phase. Many practices have expended a great deal of energy and time on the implementation of change ideas that did not improve quality or streamline processes.

Ideas to consider

- There is clear evidence that solutions address the root causes of real issues.
- The change has been successfully tested in a variety of conditions.
- The change will not benefit from any further testing or modification.
- The project measures are demonstrating real improvement.
- Improvement targets or goals have been achieved or are close to being achieved.
- The changes have improved efficiency or made jobs easier (reduced waste, avoided duplication, made things run smoother).

Next steps

To ensure the change is ready to be implemented and sustained, we will:

Embed the improved process

A common barrier to sustainability is not linking the goal of the improvement project to the strategy or vision of the organization. Without this link, it is often difficult for people to determine why valuable resources are being allocated to the improvement project. An improvement is much more likely to be sustained if it is well integrated into the culture and core processes of a practice/clinic and if it is flexible and able to respond to changes in the environment. In order to do so, the systems supporting the improvement need to be adapted so that they are compatible with the change.

Ideas to consider

- The improvement project is important to the continued success of the practice/clinic.
- The necessary facilities, supplies, and equipment are in place to support the new process.
- Training has been provided to staff and providers about the improved processes and changes so they know what is expected of them.
- Job descriptions have been updated to reflect the altered roles.
- Policies and procedures have been updated or created to reflect the new processes.
- The new processes are now “standard work” and supported with medical directives, forms, checklists, reminders (visual cues), and technology.
- The team has a mechanism for discussing, examining and adapting the improved processes in response to internal and external changes.

Next steps

To embed the improved process and make it the new standard, we will:

Build in ongoing measurement

Establishing an ongoing measurement system and a standardized way of communicating results reinforces that the change is important to the practice. A mechanism for looking at a few key and relatively easy to extract measures allows teams to see if there is slippage and to take action to resolve any issues. It also allows teams to celebrate when an indicator has stayed at an improved level over time.

Ideas to consider

- There are internal skills and a culture for continuous improvement.
- A refined set of measures to track on an ongoing basis is identified. (If the team is sustaining improvements in access, track future open capacity and third next available appointment.)
- A group or person has been assigned responsibility to extract the data for this refined set of measures.
- There is a structure or mechanism in place for reviewing the measures on a regular basis.
- There is a plan for communicating performance to front-line staff, providers, and leaders within the practice.
- There is a plan to outline what we will do to reflect on our progress – to celebrate continued success and to respond if our measures start to slip.
- Celebrate accomplishments and aspire to take performance to a new level.

Next steps

To strengthen our capacity for ongoing measurement, we will:

Helpful sources

- Centre for Healthcare Quality Improvement (2010). Sustainability Planning: A Guide for ED-PIP Coaches &Team Leads. CHQI: Toronto, Ontario.
- NHS Modernization Agency (2002). Improvement leader's guide to sustainability and spread. Ancient House Printing Group: Ipswich, England.
- Maher, Lynn, Gustafson, D. and Evans, A. (2007). NHS Sustainability: Model and Guide. NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement: England.

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