

Case study:

Using action learning sets to improve systems and processes

Cardiff is part of the Health Foundation's MAGIC programme, working with frontline health professionals and their priority projects to test how to embed best practice in shared decision making and overcome the barriers to change.

Early in 2011, Cardiff's core MAGIC team members took part in intensive training in quality improvement (QI). This highlighted the need to build strong methodology into programme work. Cascading this learning to the wider MAGIC team quickly became a priority.

What happened?

The MAGIC programme has four action learning sets to help facilitate cross-practice collaboration with primary care teams. At these events, practices can review and reflect on their activities, sharing their learning. The March 2011 action learning set was chosen as a suitable forum for cascading QI training.

The lead team from each practice attended the action learning set. Where possible, this included a GP, nurse and practice manager. The agenda focused on the first five steps of improvement work: forming the team, setting aims, establishing measures, selecting changes, and testing changes. After a short QI presentation, teams worked together to complete a table that covered the five steps.

What was the impact?

The QI approach was well received. All teams appreciated its relevance and thought it helped frame ideological change in smaller practical steps. Practice managers were particularly receptive, quickly understanding the methodology and easily applying it to their change activities. Practices struggling to identify their lead team found that the QI tasks helped them to decide who should do what and to recognise the importance of an identified team for driving the work.

Discussions revealed common work areas and shared challenges. This allowed teams to share learning and materials, and consider activities that could apply to their setting. Working on the

five steps improvement table gave participants a sense of ownership and supported their feelings of collective effort and achievement.

Cardiff Programme Manager, Natalie Joseph-Williams, says: 'Prior to the action learning set, some teams struggled to see how their work fitted with the broader programme aims. Many felt overwhelmed by what they wanted or thought they should do.'

'QI training has enabled greater clarity and the confidence to take the work forward independently. Teams are now setting their own goals and change activities, and are using "plan, do, study, act" cycles to document their learning.'

What are the lessons?

- Quality improvement training should take place during early stages of an improvement programme. It is most effective when it's relevant, once teams have started to think about the changes.
- Action learning sets are a great opportunity for sharing learning with time-pressured clinicians and developing a supportive network.
- Understanding that measurement is for improvement, not research, has helped teams move forward; they now recognise the need to test changes and document learning.
- QI-based action learning sets can help teams set short-term programme aims that can drive longer term success. They help the teams see how their changes fit with the overall programme aims.

Case studies

- Linking patient activation campaigns to a Health Board's strategic aims (Ask 3 Questions)
- Development of a DVD to be shown in a waiting area