

Identifying the Problem and Stating Your Aim

Most teams want to jump right in to identify issues and nominate fixes for the most prominent problems affecting their patients or clients. But this jump-start can lock you into misplaced priorities. It is usually better to have your group do some brainstorming and a little research to identify real problems (i.e., patterns of service delivery that create problems for patients and families) and to consider which to tackle first. You may have to collect some data—just a bit—to check your hunches. For instance, you might not think pain management is an issue for your organization, until you discover that it takes several hours to get medication from the pharmacy to the floor.

Once you think that you know what the problem is, check to be sure. At the same time, do not let indecision slow you down; rather, be committed to getting started . . . now! Our favorite mantra is, "What can you do by next Tuesday?"—a question that pushes you to get started with what is at hand. By next Tuesday, you can probably try out a pain scale for dementia patients, test an advance care planning checklist for nursing home residents and families, or put together a hospitality cart for families keeping vigil in the intensive care unit.

With the problem reasonably well identified, you will next develop an aim.

What Are We Trying to Accomplish? (Writing an Effective Aim)

This sounds like an easy task, doesn't it? Actually, writing an aim can become challenging, but a few pointers will get you there. First, write down what you want to accomplish. Keep it simple, as in the following examples:

General Statement:

Improve advance care planning for the patients in this particular hospital unit.

Or:

Provide better pain management for all of our cancer patients.

Once you have a general statement, you will need to convert it into a useful aim.

Elements of Effective Aims

1. What will improve?
2. When will it improve?
3. How much will it improve?
4. For whom will it improve?

Take a look at an aim statement that includes all of the four components.

Aim Statement: In 30 days, 90% of inpatient cancer patients on unit 4A will report pain levels lower than their own pain goal by the evening shift on their second hospital day.

This example features the four components needed to set a focused and clear aim. Anyone who reads this statement will be able to understand what you are trying to accomplish in your project, and the aim statement will keep your team focused and on track.

What will improve: Pain management should be brought within the patient's acceptable range within one day.

When: Within 30 days of project start.

How much: Increase from 30% at baseline to 90%.

For whom: Inpatient cancer patients on unit 4A.

Coming up with a useful aim is hard to do. You have to clarify your goals, think how you will measure them, and make it enough of a stretch to be worth doing. Try not to use the QI model for tiny gains; teams actually stay enthused for the work more readily if the goal is obviously worthwhile and clearly an improvement. Be prepared to adjust your aim as you work through the other issues, such as establishing a team and developing a process, which we describe in this chapter.

[illegible]

Worksheet: Creating a SMART Aim Statement

Overview

Your team is ready to make a change that requires a collective effort and focus. Essential in this achievement is the ability for all in the team to understand and align with what is trying to be accomplished. You can develop a precise, concise, and achievable Aim Statement by using a *Worksheet for Creating a SMART Aim Statement*.

Working with a team to create the Aim Statement:

1. Fill the empty boxes on the *Worksheet for Creating a SMART Aim Statement* with the parts of the statement that you believe satisfies each letter of the SMART acronym: S, M, A, R, T.
2. After you have finished entering each of the criteria, use the checklists below each letter in the acronym to see how solid your entries are.
3. Finally, form the Aim Statement at the bottom using the pertinent SMART elements. Example:
Reduce the number of instruments used in XXXXX procedures 40% by the end of month/year

When you think your Aim Statement is SMART, do this last test: Ask those outside the team yet are associated or affected by the Aim Statement to describe what the statement means to them. If the description is vague, work with them on how to make it clearer. Then have the team consider incorporating this input into the statement.

Worksheet for Creating a SMART Aim Statement

S pecific	
	___ What is the goal or intent. Precisely and concisely describe what is to be achieved. It MUST focus on achieving only ONE thing.
M easurable	
	___ There is a direct relation between the increase and the decrease of a measure and the attainment or loss of the goal. Recommend: Start the Aim Statement with Increase/Decrease...then describe the object of what is to be measured ___ There are means with which to measure and monitor progress over time (to take, collect, and record the measurement)
A ctionable	
	___ The team can take action to overcome any known barriers to achieving the proposed measurable results ___ The 'HOW' of achieving this goal is NOT part of the Aim Statement (this would restrict other plausible solutions)
R ealistic	
	___ Given the resources available, it is within the teams ability to achieve, control, or influence the Aim's attainment ___ There is no significant that will compete with the time, attention or ability to achieve the goal
T imely	
	___ The goal has a target date. If timeline is beyond 6 months there are interim Milestones. Recommend: ...achieve intent by a specified date ___ There is nothing that should compete with the time and attention needed to achieve the goal
Aim Statement Now, craft a clear, concise, precise Aim Statement integrating the pertinent elements of the above	