

Plans for Continuous Improvement – be SMART

By Donna Dark, your governance guide (Lighthouse Advisory Services)

This article addresses why continuous improvement is more important now than ever, and key tips to ensure your approach to continuous improvement meets compliance requirements and demonstrate your commitment to good governance including the use of SMART goals.

Plan for Continuous Improvement (PCI) – increased regulatory focus

In November 2021, the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (the Commission) identified an increased focus on Plans for Continuous Improvement. For the commission, the PCI document is an important tool of accountability and commitment to National Quality Standards compliance, Quality, and overall good governance for aged care services.

The PCI is a dynamic document which should address issues identified by the Commission to an Approved Provider via audits, support contacts, complaints, and investigations of a service. Opportunities for improvement identified by the service are also captured in the PCI through those sources above and others such as the self-assessment tool, audits, incident and complaint investigations and direct stakeholder feedback.

The Commission can determine regulatory action if a submitted PCI does not meet their requirements and can issue a Direction (Direction Notice) to revise the PCI and resubmit within 14 days. The outcome of the assessment of your PCI can also impact your service provider Service Compliance Rating.

Begin with the end in mind - use the SMART approach

The SMART goal approach lends itself well to CI activities. Using this approach can help your team to achieve a consistent way to contribute to developing the CI activity plan.

Specific

What is the issue or problem and what do you want to achieve? The more specific you can get, the better chance you have of success.

Measurable

How will you measure success? You will need to know where you are starting from to then measure what you achieve. How will you do this? This might involve a survey, reviewing clinical data or using outcomes from an audit or gap analysis.

Achievable

Consider a balance of optimism and realism in what you can achieve. If the activity is a large one you may want to separate it into smaller projects so that you can have some small wins and gain momentum and not get overwhelmed.

Timebound

CI activities need to include a specific date/month when you expect a result to be achieved. Be practical about what you can achieve and how long it will take. Life happens, and you may need to revisit timeframes due to unexpected events.

Other considerations for CI

Make sure your PCI meets requirements

If your service prefers to use your own template to submit a PCI it is very important that you map the format and content expected in the Commission's template to your own to ensure that your submitted content meets requirements. You can use this map as an education tool for your team and you could also use this to explain your approach to Commission Assessors as needed.

Clearly identify responsibilities

CI activities need an owner who is accountable for ensuring assigned CI activity actions are completed, any issues are identified and managed, and outcomes are evaluated. One person cannot do it all.

If you are assigning responsibilities that individual also needs to know what is assigned to them and that they understand their responsibilities. No one likes the surprise of responding to a CI activity with a Commission Assessor that they knew nothing about!

Evaluation of CI activities – tough to do, but essential

Evaluation of improvement activities requires us to be both honest and objective about the results we achieved as compared to our objectives. Not every CI activity works the way we had planned. Capturing lessons learned from activities that do not work out is just as important as capturing successful outcomes. Acknowledging mistakes and feeling safe to do so are hallmarks of a positive workplace culture.

Share the load

Just like organisational governance, CI is a philosophy that everyone in your service and organisation must understand and practice to an extent that is reasonable for their role. Every improvement is important to the end goal of happy, satisfied consumers and teams.

Do you include this expectation of participation in your position descriptions and performance appraisals?

Further information

For more information on the Commissions perspective on the Continuous Improvement philosophy and the PCI review process see Regulatory Bulletin 2021- 15
<https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/resources/rb-2021-15-plan-continuous-improvement-requirements>

Using SMART goals

<https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/smart-goals.htm>