

Mapping The Road To Quality Results

Researchers analyze the methods employed by AHCA Quality Award winners to light the way for others.

QUALITY IS NO LONGER SOMETHING providers can determine based on their own standards or even those of regulatory agencies. Rather, it is something that customers judge and continually redefine based on their expectations. As a result, the management paradigms of the past will not work in the future.

How, then, can providers determine the right path to follow?

A team of researchers began the process by seeking a group of high-performance long term care organizations that could show the way. Since the American Health Care Association's (AHCA) Step 2 and Step 3 Quality Award process was designed to identify high performers, it was decided that the 2004 award recipients would provide a reliable study group.

By reviewing the applications of the award recipients, the researchers con-

structed a matrix of the recipients' responses to 11 core values and concepts (see Table 1, below) and the demographic and descriptive aspects of each facility. The team was then able to establish an initial baseline of similar

practices for the organizations.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the senior leaders of each winning organization to determine what motivated their change in performance and what changes were most significant. The 90-minute to two-hour interviews included 40 questions—some developed by author Jim Collins for research on his book "Good to Great"—touching on such issues as the provider's quality history, quality drivers, transition deci-

sions, operational impact, leadership, and next steps.

If the organization was part of a multifacility group, the interviews were

TABLE 1 CORE VALUES AND CONCEPTS OF QUALITY

- Visionary leadership
- Customer-driven
- Organizational and personal learning
- Valuing employees and partners
- Agility
- Focus on the future
- Managing for innovation
- Managing by fact
- Public responsibility
- Systems perspective
- Outcomes

Source: The authors

TABLE 2 KEY ELEMENTS OF A QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

- Quality-focused mission
- Customer-satisfaction surveys
- Process for customer concerns
- Employee satisfaction surveys
- Gather and analyze performance data
- Methodology for continuous quality improvement

Source: The authors



‘You need to remain focused and persistent on your quality journey.’

also conducted with corporate-level leaders.

Seven Common Themes

Through this work and a subsequent validation process, the research team identified seven common themes embodied by these high-performance organizations:

1.) *They choose to act on a vision for what can be.* It was found that each of these organizations had a vision for becoming better, which drives them to take action. Generally, it was found that these organizations remained focused and persistent in their quality journey with a steadfast commitment to what they were going to do. Strategic plans were very clear and limited to a few key points. “You need to keep it simple and keep things

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focused to make sure you will accomplish your goals,” one respondent said.

2.) *Leaders and managers lead by example.* Leaders in high-performance organizations consistently demonstrated a personal commitment to mutual respect and performance excellence through relationships, improving

processes, and making changes that benefit the group more than themselves. They also provide a highly effective communication environment.

3.) *Customer expectations define quality standards.* The high-performance operators had a systemic approach to listening and knowing the needs and expect-

tations of their customers: patients and families. One of the administrators put it this way, “I had to learn how to listen better. Things that are not important to me might be incredibly important to them.” For these providers, mere compliance with regulations represents a performance “floor.”

4.) *Employees are engaged.* At top-performing facilities, staff involvement was important and staff members had developed intense levels of engagement. One organization tasked 50 staff members with helping to write the Step 2 Quality Award application. It is really a critical issue to align values, develop trust between employees and managers, select the right employees, and create a culture of accountability and self-motivation.

5.) *An effective quality-management system sustains focus on performance.* These organizations developed a quality system by linking their strategic planning to a quality-focused mission and vision. Further, they developed a set of balanced measures to assess performance that includes both customer and employee satisfaction.

6.) *Companies develop a structure to fulfill their quality journey.* These organizations had both formal and informal structures to support their quality initiatives. One of the administrators said, “We do strategic analysis that is quality focused and generates long-term goals for quality and financing. The quality steering committee then tracks progress, oversees the action plans, and charts the improvement teams. So when we talk about this whole idea of system approach, we’re talking about having a consistent way to solve problems.” These organizations supported the creation of productive teams and committees to involve employees in identifying and solving problems.

7.) *They are committed to continuous learning and growth.* None of the organizations studied believed they had “arrived,” and they see education as an ongoing, necessary investment. One

leader talked about how the facility refused to reduce training and education expenses in the face of very difficult state budget cuts. Individuals also cited a variety of educational venues, including external resources, associations, and even the AHCA Quality Award process.

Other Conclusions

The research team reached a few conclusions from the Step 3 interviews that were uniquely emphasized in their quality journey. First, the articulation of the primary customers as being the patient and family became more evident. Second, those interviewed expressed the need for a commitment to quality learning that is unwavering. Third, strategic planning was fully integrated as a key driver of quality improvement.

Interviews with corporate leaders at multifacility companies clearly identified facility leadership as a primary reason for variance in performance. The corporations also seemed to fall into one of two camps regarding the way they supported organizational quality. Some focused on leadership creating a quality-focused vision and philosophy to drive their quality journey. Others focused on providing operating standards and measurement systems that give feedback for quality assurance activities. Corporations were generally committed to both quality leadership development and providing multiple types of technology support.

Recommended Paths

The research provided a number of insights for organizations to consider as they begin a quality journey:

- Learn everything you can about customer-focused quality, including resources outside of the health and aging services profession. One administrator said, “The mission and understanding the quality approach sets us apart.”
- Make a personal commitment to the journey. As one administrator said,

“We overcame obstacles with patience, made incremental but sincere changes, and kept a long-term focus using a stick-to-it attitude that some called being stubborn.” Facilities should not begin the journey to quality until they have the necessary resources, support, and a determination to continue.

- Build a culture of truth and trust by confronting the current reality and being transparent. One new administrator found that some of her supervisors were embarrassed and had trouble accepting that there were problems in their departments. She decided to personally coach her managers on how to

accept criticism as an opportunity to improve. They adopted the saying, “If you can’t see it, you can’t improve it.”

- Understand that communication is the lifeblood of the organization. High-performance facility leaders had open-door policies and talked about admitting to mistakes. One administra-

tor said, “We share everything with the staff, even how decisions are made.”

- Systematically develop the key elements of a quality management system (*see Table 2, page 69*).

- Know your customers and recognize that trust will come when staff and families see that decisions are

focused on patient needs and wants. The high-performance organizations had systematic processes to make patient-focused decisions.

- Enable employees to meaningfully contribute to quality improvement. The key is for facilities to start small and build on their successes. This initiative also requires education on how to effectively participate in projects and on teams.

- Identify external sources for ongoing support. Administrators should not hesitate to look at the vast array of initiatives available through the Eden Alternative, Pioneer Network, Quality First, AHCA, the American College of Health Care Administrators, and state associations.

- Establish a visible structure to support quality improvement that provides formal processes and assesses performance.

- Create an effective strategic planning process with a balanced set of outcome measures. Providers should make sure that their quality improvement goals are measurable and that they allocate resources to support them.

- Invest in developing critical knowledge in your leaders and managers. Facilities that don’t have effective immediate supervisors will have trouble with retention. The high-performance facilities trained supervisors in communication, interviewing skills, quality tools, and interdisciplinary skills. One provider even developed a 12-session educational program at a local college as a result of sitting down with supervisors and asking, “What do you need to learn to be more effective?”

- Be patient. Most leaders readily admit that they underestimated the amount of time and energy it would take to achieve and sustain quality results. While they had some early gains, they found that integrating this new way of thinking into everyone’s thinking required patience, persistence, and sometimes confrontation. ■