

Conducting a Change Exercise

What is a Change Exercise, and Why Do It?

A change exercise is a quick, effective way to make changes to address issues you discovered during your walk-through. The NIATx Change Model relies on the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle to turn a change idea into action.

The PDSA Cycle is simple in structure and natural in execution. It represents the natural flow of information gathering, decision-making, action, and assessment involved in a wide range of actions. It uses a series of short, rapid cycles, with each cycle—from planning through implementation—taking only a couple of weeks.

The results of each change cycle are compared to pre-test measurements to ensure that the change is actually an improvement. Only when the change cycle results in a significant improvement in the existing process is the change fully implemented.

By testing changes this way, you

1. Minimize risks and expenditures of time and money
2. Make changes in a way that is less disruptive to clients and staff
3. Reduce resistance to change by starting on a small scale
4. Learn from the ideas that work, as well as from those that do not

By starting with small changes to test ideas quickly and easily, and using simple measurements to monitor the effect of changes over time, the PDSA Cycle can lead to larger improvements through successive cycles of change.

Steps for Conducting a Change Exercise

First, answer these three questions:

1. What are we trying to accomplish?
2. How will we know if a change is an improvement?
3. What changes can we test that may result in an improvement?

These questions ensure that you have identified a promising change, one that can address an issue important to your organization. Think about how you will know if a change really is an improvement. What will the results be? Decreased waiting times for clients? Fewer no-show appointments? Always make sure you design the change so that you can test these improvement measures by analyzing data you collect before, during, and after the change. For instance, monitor how long it takes an average client to be admitted before and after the change, or record no-shows in a before-and-after, or control group, scenario.

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Before Starting the Change

1. Collect baseline data for the indicator you wish to improve (e.g., your current no-show rates).
2. Determine the target population and location for the change(s) (e.g., new IOP clients).
3. Establish a clear aim (e.g., reduce no-show rates for IOP assessment appointments).
4. Select a Change Leader and a Change Team responsible for developing and implementing change ideas.

PLAN the Change

The purpose of the PLAN step is to identify the aim of the change, and predict which results will indicate that the change is a real improvement. In this stage you should consider what steps need to be taken to prepare—what needs to be improved: why is this important; to clients, staff, and the agency, who needs to be involved, and when do various actions need to happen? Remember to use what you learned in your walk-through exercise to guide your change plans.

DO the Plan

The purpose of the DO step is experimentation. Try the change for a short period of time and in a limited area. In this step, you should document any problems and unexpected observations, as well as analyze the data you are collecting on the change. Remember to change only one thing at a time, so you can track the data associated with the change and determine which change is actually making an impact.

STUDY the Results

In the STUDY step, you should complete the analysis of your data, comparing your predicted results with your actual results. In this step, you should summarize what you have learned. Ask what worked well and what did not? Did the change result in an improvement? Why or why not?

ACT on the New Knowledge

In the ACT step, use the results of the STUDY stage to decide on your next steps. Was the change beneficial to clients, staff, and/or the organization? Should the change be increased in scope or tested under different conditions? Should the change be adopted, adapted, or abandoned? What will be the next cycle?

REPEAT

Consider what barriers you faced, what you will do differently in the next cycle, and what went well and should be repeated. Begin a new cycle, adapting the change as needed, in order to make it a real improvement. Your changes should stay true to the PLAN-DO-STUDY-ACT Cycle.

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PDSA Cycle Example

Aim: Reduce New Client No-Shows

Cycle 1

Plan. Decide to discontinue agency's procedure of giving prospective clients assessment appointments.

Do. Tell all prospective clients to come in either at 7:30 a.m. next day, or at their convenience.

Study. Evaluate the change. An example: "We find that this change resulted in more clients coming in immediately, and did not result in long waiting lines. The staff could revise their workloads to do more flexible tasks (such as paperwork)."

Act. "The change did not work perfectly the first time. So in the spirit of improvement, we initiated a new change cycle."

Cycle 2

Plan. Decide to continue not assigning prospective clients assessment appointments.

Do. Assign managers to work alongside intake and assessment staff to personally experience and solve problems that staff encounter.

Study. Evaluate the change: "We find that the percentage of clients who show for assessments increases from 25% to 65%. In addition, the percentage that continues from assessment to treatment increases from 19% to 52%."

Act. The change is then fully implemented. The improvement benefited clients, who could come in right away; staff, who did not have as many unexpected no-shows; and the agency, which increased its number of billable hours.