



PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

FOR LEGAL AID

BEGINNER'S JOURNEY

KEYS TO SUCCESS

You don't need to be a subject matter expert in process improvement to contribute to your project's success. In fact, the most important keys to success have nothing to do with process improvement experience or expertise.

Staff buy-in

It's important to inform all staff when you decide to undertake a process improvement project. Sometimes staff members worry that a process improvement project may end up in a blaming situation or in eliminating positions. One way to address those concerns is sharing with the entire staff what process improvement is, why some legal aid programs have embraced it, why your program is undertaking it, the benefits other legal aids have achieved and those you hope to achieve--*before* you get started.

Once your program has begun its project, provide periodic opportunities to share progress, answer questions and address concerns with all staff. Process improvement involves change and can touch or impact many staff members duties.

Leadership support

While CEOs or Executive Directors do not usually serve on a Process Improvement project team it is critical that they support the undertaking. It is also important that leadership understands and supports the time commitment staff will be making--and is willing to trust and empower the project team to analyze processes, identify pain points and develop and test solutions. Conversely, program leadership should be kept informed, be prepared make necessary executive-level decisions when called upon to do so and be willing to serve as a program-wide cheerleader for the project.

Collaboration

Process improvement activities require a collaborative approach to succeed, and the need for a cohesive and effective multidisciplinary team is critical for positive outcomes. Many levels and functions of the organization should be incorporated, especially the frontlines, i.e. those who work directly with callers, walk-ins, etc. at the earliest stages of entry into the intake system.

Diversity of perspective



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Oftentimes in legal aid, memberships on projects teams or workgroups is exclusively or heavily weighted towards attorneys or those in supervisory, management or executive roles. In process improvement this kind of “imbalance” severely limits the diversity of perspectives in the room, undermines the likelihood of accurate process mapping and can diminish organizational buy-in.

Safe Space

Even when a more balanced group of staff has been brought together, attorney and supervisory members are often more outspoken in ways that can dominate the discussion to the detriment of others’ participation. Management hierarchies can also take its toll on the willingness of newer attorneys to speak up.

Finally, in multi-office programs, real or perceived “office” hierarchies may exist. For example, bigger offices, urban offices, or “central” offices may dominate smaller or more rural offices within the same program.

None of this is likely intentional. The attorneys and/or supervisors in the room may be totally unaware the impact their vociferousness may have on others. But it is a reality of human dynamics which requires acknowledging, a solid set of ground rules and supportive facilitation to overcome.

When multiple roles and offices are involved, it is critical to set ground rules, particularly those that create a safe space for more introverted participants and/or those who are not lawyers and/or not management. Diversity & equity of perspectives is absolutely critical to success.

Giving Feedback and Receiving Feedback

Providing specific and timely feedback in a clear respectful manner during process improvement is particularly important to the success of the project.

Most of us hesitate to give feedback for fear of offending someone or because we don’t want to be thought of as complainers. It’s also not easy to receive feedback about something that is part of your job or that is specific to your workgroup or team.

A process improvement project will help you exercise and improve your feedback skills, both giving and receiving. It may even be helpful to spend a little bit of time during the project team orientation to talk about when and how to give feedback.



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In order to hear feedback, you need to listen to it. Don't think about what you're going to say in reply, just listen. This can be especially difficult for lawyers who operate in an adversarial system where it is their job to immediately rebut anything perceived as negative to their position.

Emotional intelligence will be essential. You need to be aware of your emotions (self-awareness) and also be able to manage them (self-control), so that even if the feedback causes an emotional response, you can control it.