



## An Integrated Approach to Quality

*Building more responsive, resilient health systems.*

As health systems expand in size and grow in complexity, it is becoming even more important for leaders and managers to define quality based on customer needs; create an enabling, motivating environment for change; adopt a systems view that can marshal multiple moving parts; and harness learning to improve the delivery of care. The COVID-19 pandemic has also underscored the importance of organizational and community resilience.

The whole system quality approach presents a way forward for health systems seeking to build more resilient organizations: Through a process of rigorous learning, healthcare organizations can design responsive management systems to continuously deliver services that reliably and sustainably meet the evolving needs of patients, populations and communities—in times of stability and crisis. With this approach, quality is the organizational strategy, not merely a component of the strategy.

When quality is divorced from organizational strategy, and quality assurance is the primary force driving the approach to organizational quality, many health systems fall into a cycle of reactive quality management. This context produces

activity driven by urgency rather than purpose and results in unwanted strategic, operational and clinical variation.

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many health systems to break this cycle, requiring them to rapidly identify the needs of their communities and redesign care delivery to respond accordingly. During the pandemic, healthcare organizations have been actively learning how to manage quality in new ways. The uncertainty and urgency of the pandemic has provided a clear purpose and motivation for learning at an accelerated pace.

### **The Whole System Quality Approach**

Whole system quality offers a more holistic, proactive approach to strategic quality. It is an organizationwide strategic pursuit of quality through management practices that facilitate knowledge exchange to inform activities and leadership principles that foster a culture of learning.

The management practices comprise an integrated set of activities that facilitate learning across the organization to ensure alignment of quality efforts. The leadership principles involve engaging in the disciplines of a learning organization to foster a culture

that promotes inquiry, reflection, systems thinking and purpose.

The collective pursuit of strategic quality necessitates the articulation of the roles, responsibilities and activities at every level of the healthcare organization, from patients and families to the board of directors. These essential management practices are organized into three quality domains, as outlined in *Juran's Quality Handbook*, 5th edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1999): quality planning, quality control and quality improvement.

1. **Quality planning** is a process an organization undertakes to identify the needs of patients, communities and the organization's workforce; define systemwide quality goals; set priorities; respond to external critiques of performance; and design and deploy a resourced strategy to reliably meet those needs.
2. **Quality control** establishes performance standards; develops continuous internal information relay systems to track performance, continuously identifying gaps between actual and desired performance; and applies standard work to close gaps and limit

variation in performance. This activity refocuses the organization on continuous self-monitoring in pursuit of its own goals, lessening dependence on quality assurance and external judgment of performance.

3. **Quality improvement** employs a structured approach to system redesign to achieve new levels of performance in specific priority areas through the science and methods of improvement.

Creating the necessary infrastructure for whole system quality requires an organizational commitment to continuous learning, as well as the methods and capabilities to produce it. Quality gives learning a purpose, and learning steers organizations toward their quality vision. As leaders identify the needs of customers, gain insight into the interdependencies of their system, determine the drivers of persistent challenges for the workforce, and identify innovations and opportunities for improvement, the process of learning advances the organization toward its quality goals.

The whole system quality approach promotes leadership principles that foster the social norms and behaviors of a learning culture:

**Build a shared sense of purpose:** A participative process of establishing a compelling shared vision focuses the learning objectives and ensures that the activities and efforts of all participants are aligned toward a singular purpose. *Example: To create a unified quality vision, senior leaders might begin by inviting staff input on what really matters to them.*

**Practice systems thinking:** Systems thinking serves as a critical tool to appreciate the complexity of the dynamic, interconnected healthcare system and identify the challenges and opportunities in pursuing quality goals. *Example: Senior leaders can expect that every department undertakes priority work that aligns with enterprise goals and uses common improvement methods and metrics to track progress.*

**Engage in collective learning and dialogue:** Team learning, or the process of collective inquiry, dialogue and co-production of knowledge, expands the problem-solving capacity of the organization by providing access to insights, information and expertise across different levels and groups. *Example: Develop an executive team learning agenda, outlining quantitative and qualitative data from the field required for planning and adaptive decision-making.*

**Practice personal inquiry and reflection:** The discipline of self-reflection—unearthing deeply held belief structures and understanding how these structures dramatically influence behaviors—enables each member of the organization to contribute to dialogue in meaningful ways. *Example: Senior leaders can demonstrate public self-reflection at meetings, huddles and walkarounds, modeling humility, curiosity and candor as they progress through their personal journey of learning and discovery.*

Putting practical knowledge about how to plan, lead, manage and improve quality into the hands of health system leaders and practitioners has never been more urgent. The COVID-19 pandemic is

highlighting the key role that learning plays in adapting to and solving new, urgent system challenges. Whole system quality offers a structured approach to harness those lessons to address both present-day and future needs. By implementing whole system quality, health systems can build a cultural foundation that enables change and a management infrastructure to pursue quality—with ambition, alignment and agility—through a commitment to continuous learning.

This moment presents a unique opportunity for healthcare organizations. When it's time to begin a period of post-pandemic reconstruction and recovery, healthcare leaders have a chance to fundamentally redesign care and build more responsive, resilient systems. ▲



Sampath

*Bhargavi Sampath is research associate at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (bsampath@ihi.org). Karen Baldoza is vice president at IHI (kbaldoza@ihi.org).*



Baldoza

*Jennifer Lenoci-Edwards, RN, is vice president at IHI (jlenoci-edwards@ihi.org). Pierre Barker, MD, is chief scientific officer at IHI (pbarker@ihi.org).*



Lenoci-Edwards



Barker

**Editor's note:** To learn more about whole system quality, download the free white paper at [ihi.org/WholeSystemQuality](http://ihi.org/WholeSystemQuality).