One Medical Student’s Journey in Leadership and Quality Improvement

By IHI Open School | Monday, November 13, 2017

Sherry Liang, a medical student and Co-President for the IHI Open School Chapter Portland State University and Oregon Health & Science University (PSU/OHSU), has won the IHI Open School’s Change Agent of the Year award. Get inspired and read her winning essay below.

Serving in my second year as Co-President of the PSU & OHSU IHI Open School Chapter, I am elated to share my journey in becoming a change agent in health care.

In 2015, I was deeply inspired by the PSU & OHSU Chapter’s West Coast Conference and immediately started a Chapter as an undergraduate at my alma mater, Willamette University. Within the first four months, we’d held 20 events, and by the end of the year we’d solidified our niche as a pre-health professions club.

When I entered medical school in 2016, I expected my peers would be excited to engage in the thrill of the IHI Open School with me. To my surprise, I was the only one (alongside my fellow PSU/OHSU Chapter members) who felt that way. For the past 15 months, I have been living in two starkly opposing cultures: my growing Chapter of change agents – made up of students across the two schools and multiple health professional programs – and my medical school, where I have felt lonely in my passion for quality improvement. To me, that was intolerable. I felt determined to change the status quo.

It started with a two-year project where my fellow Co-President and I aimed to establish a sustainable brand of project-based and networking educational opportunities that the Portland community could recognize and engage in year after year with the Chapter. The momentum behind this project came in two simple words that Dr. Don Berwick shared with a gathering of Open School leaders: “fail forward.”

To accomplish our aim, we ran several PDSA cycles in our Chapter, knowing that some may not be successful, but that all would humble us with lessons to learn and that our second term would provide us with another chance to do it better. We saw this in last year’s leadership
retreat, where we felt lost on how to develop the leadership of others, to this year’s retreat, where we translated our skills learned from the Open School’s annual Leadership Academy and the Leadership and Organizing for Change course to our leaders. In six hours, our team explored different working styles, crafted public narratives, co-created events, and developed elevator speeches. Our leaders then practiced these skills in the second iteration of our Chapter’s Open House event, where they delivered rapid elevator speeches about the Chapter’s various opportunities to expand our membership.

In our first year, we experienced the barriers to sustaining community projects, and thus aimed to collaborate with community organizations and have our members engage in existing projects. We had high attendance rates at our educational events, but felt the need to incorporate more of the IHI Open School courses into our Chapter’s work. This year, we set the goal of having 30 members in our Chapter complete the IHI Open School Basic Certificate in Quality & Safety by May 2018 through our new Chapter Leader-facilitated Learning Sessions.

To sustain a strong initiative, I am currently taking the Leadership and Organizing for Change course to iteratively improve our work. So far, I’ve led a Learning Session based on the Open School courses QI 101: Introduction to Health Care Improvement, QI 102: How to Improve with the Model for Improvement, and QI 103: Testing and Measuring Changes with PDSA Cycles, for 23 first year medical students, along with five other Chapter Leaders and a Master Black Belt in Lean Six Sigma, who served as small group facilitators. Over the course of two hours, students learned to develop improvement project charters based on the Model for Improvement and played a Lean game to simulate patient flow through an emergency department in order to measure and test changes to see if they lead to improvement. At the end of the Learning Session, we had 10 students commit to completing the IHI Open School Basic Certificate by May 1, 2018! The enthusiasm was palpable from many students, a sign that that slowly but surely, my two different worlds are beginning to merge into one.

Moving beyond the Chapter, my work as a change agent continues with my capstone project to design a novel curriculum for all medical students to complete the IHI Open School Basic Certificate and the Quality Improvement Practicum course.