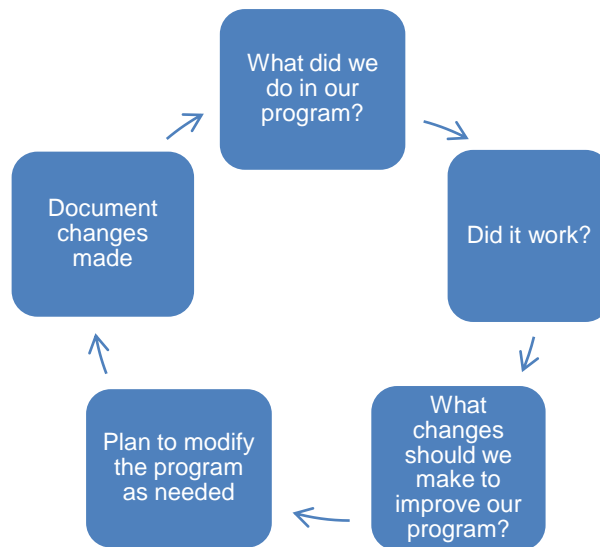# Continuous Quality Improvement

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is a systematic approach that uses information to make improvements to a program with an emphasis on future results.[1] CQI is an ongoing process of gathering and reviewing process and outcome data in order to improve the program, both during and after implementation. Specific steps in the CQI process are outlined in *Table 1*. However, CQI is a frequently overlooked component of the program implementation process; program implementers may address immediate problems without creating a plan with an intentional feedback loop and system of accountability to ensure that all levels of the program are working smoothly.[2] CQI is used to make positive changes even when things are going well with a program.

Table 1. Specific Steps in the Continuous Quality Improvement Process[3]

- **Step 1:** Identify a need/issue/problem and develop a problem statement
- **Step 2:** Define the current situation--break down the problem into component parts, identify major problem areas, develop a target improvement goal
- **Step 3:** Analyze the problem--identify the root causes of the problem
- **Step 4:** Develop an action plan--outline ways to correct the root causes of the problem and specific actions to be taken
- **Step 5:** Look at the results--confirm that the problem and its root causes have decreased, identify whether the target has been met
- **Step 6:** Start over--go back to the first step and use the same process for the next problem

Figure 1. CQI: The Process

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What did we do in our program? → Did it work? → What changes should we make to improve our program? → Plan to modify the program as needed → Document changes made → (back to start)

How CQI Differs from Process Evaluation

While process evaluation is conducted independently of program activities by internal staff or consultants, CQI is conducted as part of routine program activities by program staff or internal evaluation staff and should not be conducted by an external contractor or consultant. Additionally, process evaluation is designed to answer specific questions about program implementation, acceptability, and/or relevance and addresses values and priorities of stakeholders. CQI, on the other

hand, is designed to ensure that the program 1) meets or exceeds quality standards and benchmarks to continuously improve service delivery and 2) addresses professional standards and benchmarks.[4]

Types of CQI

There are two types of CQI: mid-course and strategic. Mid-course CQI is a series of activities to make program improvements as the program unfolds or during the ongoing operations of a program. Also known as everyday CQI or routine CQI, mid-course CQI makes use of opportunities for improvement as they arise, rather than waiting until problems escalate or resources have been spent. Mid-course Strategic CQI, on the other hand, is a big-picture approach to improvement. It is a systematic assessment that provides feedback about whether the program is addressing the appropriate issues, whether the program is achieving desired outcomes, what program implementers should continue doing, and what they should change. The audience for strategic CQI is likely to be funders or key decision makers.

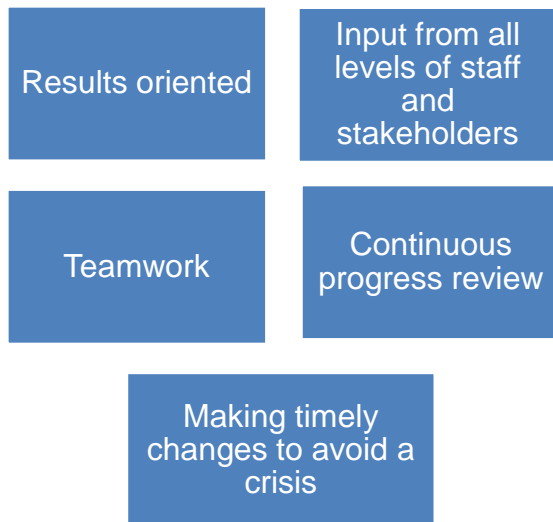| What you will need for mid-course CQI	What you will need for strategic CQI
Fidelity monitoring logs, participant and staff feedback forms (e.g., specific lessons, participant satisfaction forms), facilitator notes, and observer notes.	A plan, mid-course CQI documentation, pre- and post-tests, staff feedback, and other documentation (i.e., about your evaluation, analysis, actions, and improvements).

Why Is CQI Important?

CQI is critical to the continued growth and improvement of your program. It helps to (1) identify components of your program that worked well and those that did not; (2) decide how to adjust your plan and implementation to move closer to your goals and desired outcomes; and (3) ensure future successful implementation and increase buy-in from stakeholders, including staff involved in the process.
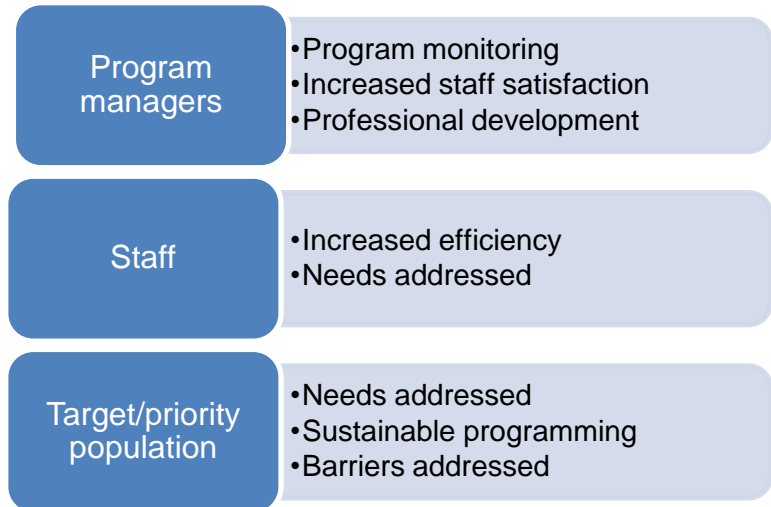
Figure 2 presents key characteristics of CQI. CQI focuses on results, involves input from multiple levels of staff and stakeholders, requires teamwork and continuous review of progress, and involves timely changes in approach in response to needs identified during review. CQI provides program managers a systematic way to monitor their project;[2] an opportunity to show staff how their feedback is being addressed, which helps to build trust and relationships; and a mechanism to identify staff needs for professional development and other forms of support. Implementing CQI can help staff use their time more efficiently; by catching problems early and preventing future problems, staff spend less time rectifying mistakes.[2] CQI also enables staff to document clearly any needs for additional resources or professional development. CQI helps to fine tune your program so that it meets the needs of your target population effectively and efficiently, thus maximizing the chances of attracting future funding.[2] Finally, CQI helps to identify issues that might need to be addressed for your program to achieve desired outcomes.

Figure 2. Key Characteristics and Benefactors of CQI

What are the key characteristics of CQI?   **Who benefits from CQI, and how?**

Results oriented	Input from all levels of staff and stakeholders

Teamwork	Continuous progress review

Making timely changes to avoid a crisis

Program managers	•Program monitoring •Increased staff satisfaction •Professional development
Staff	•Increased efficiency •Needs addressed
Target/priority population	•Needs addressed •Sustainable programming •Barriers addressed

Getting Started with CQI

The ideal time to build support for CQI is at the very beginning of a project, but it is better to begin mid-project than to omit CQI. Strategies for implementing CQI include being flexible about how information is reported (e-mail, online, hard copy, fax), paying staff to meet after hours, and managers showing visible commitment to reporting and learning.[5]

1. **Garner support from both leadership and staff**
   - Present a draft CQI plan. The draft plan should help staff learn what they can expect if they participate in CQI. Overlapping this plan with what is currently being done will help staff realize that CQI may not involve a large increase in their work.
   - Educate staff/managers about what CQI is and its value. It is important to (a) explain that the CQI process is designed to ensure that all staff are growing as professionals and (b) discuss what is going well, what might need to change, and that CQI is not used to measure individual staff performance.
   - Address concerns at the outset, and address these concerns explicitly.
2. **Ensure adequate infrastructure** (e.g., meeting space, access to data, time, and timely access to decision-makers)
3. **Ensure a process to conduct CQI effectively**
   - Check that data are being collected, and that staff responsible have a plan in place for making sure the data are collected in a timely fashion.
   - Indicate who is responsible for collecting the data, to whom the information is to be submitted, and by when, for every type of information you want to use in your CQI process.

1. **Gather information about the program**
   - Review and synthesize the information, looking for patterns and trouble spots. Consider how these patterns might affect your performance measures.
2. **Ensure that staff communicate and meet**
   - Review your meeting schedule and determine whether you need to add meetings specifically dedicated for CQI. Determine key points at which it will be most appropriate to meet.
   - Include staff from all levels.
   - Schedule a debriefing meeting within a few days of the conclusion of any one-time event or workshop.
   - Meet more frequently to conduct CQI when you are starting a program.
3. **Systematically ask the right questions**

Examples of key questions	Examples of questions about information you are collecting	Examples of questions about next steps
• Are we on target for meeting performance goals? • What has gone well? • What factors have contributed to successes? • What are the challenges to implementation? • What needs to be improved? Why? How?	• Is there a need for additional information? • Is there information we no longer need? • Is there a need for improvement in data collection tools? • Do we need more time and/or funding to collect this information?	• Who will make changes and by when? • How will we know if changes are successful? • What data will we gather and from whom? • When should we next review changes?

Common Pitfalls of CQI

Despite the benefits of CQI, keeping track of paperwork can be cumbersome, and staff might view CQI as a hindrance to their daily work; the process might be perceived as complicated since it entails translation of data into meaningful action; and staff might not be prepared for change. Setting priorities and collectively deciding what type of information would be most useful in the CQI process, integrating measurement into the daily routine, initiating changes on a small scale to test them before implementation, being opportunistic, performing CQI at short intervals, and providing strong leadership to establish organizational commitment and support staff and activities, can reduce the burden on staff and provide more opportunities to learn.[6]

Remember that CQI helps keep your program current for your participants, resulting in a greater likelihood of achieving desired results. CQI can help your organization work smarter, not harder. It is easier to make small changes than large ones, and to fix problems before they become too large to manage. CQI is a report writer's best friend; it ensures that all changes and successes are documented moving forward, providing valuable material when it comes time to communicate with stakeholders. CQI shows stakeholders that your program is going through an ongoing fine-tuning process to meet the needs of your target or priority population, which may help to support sustainability.

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