INSIGHT

Improving services – systematic improvement

Introduction

Systematic improvement is about knowing where problems happen and prioritising what to fix. It needs people providing the service to know how to investigate problems and design new ways of working.

Use this capability to work on step changes to how work is done and day-to-day incremental improvements in services. You need to see improvement as part of how you work rather than a separate activity, or someone else's responsibility, and be open to learning from others. Improvement needs both technical skills and the right supporting behaviours to make it happen.

What are the benefits of getting this right?

- You achieve step change and daily incremental improvements that improve the quality and efficiency of your service.
- You improve services by spotting, prioritising and fixing problems.
- You fix common problems and wider system issues by collaborating with people in other parts of the service, inside and outside your organisation.
- You improve the flow of work through the whole end-to-end service, tackling problems that have an impact on the bigger picture and the user's experience of it.

What are the consequences of getting this wrong?

- People waste time continually dealing with the same issues and on workarounds.
- You do not fix the service issues that matter for users.
- You do not use the knowledge and ideas of the people who know best how the service works.
- You miss opportunities to learn and improve from good practice.
- Teams use different approaches and users get an inconsistent service.
- People waste time working on problems that have already been solved by other teams or organisations.

Explore our four insights on systematic improvement:

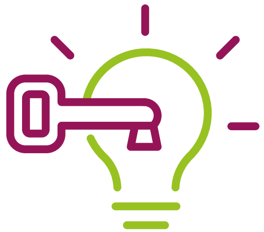
1. **Gather and use information** – You need the right information to fix the problems that matter for your service users.
2. **Build capability and obligation to improve** – Ensuring that people have the skills, tools, time and support to improve and are expected to do so.
3. **Get the right people involved** – Making it possible for everyone to contribute, and valuing their different backgrounds, knowledge and experience.
4. **Learn and improve across boundaries** – Fixing problems and sharing learning between different parts of your organisation and different organisations.

Gather and use information

Having the right information

Getting routine feedback

Taking a 'no blame' approach



You need the right information to fix problems for your service users

Challenge 1: Having the right information to identify what to improve

If you get this right: you have all the information you need, at the right time, to tell you what your priority problems are. You can take timely action to fix issues before they cause problems for people using the service.

What works well:

- Having concise performance information based on what is important to people using the service.
- Using trend analysis – for example, performance over time and between different types of users – to understand when variations mean you need to make improvements.
- Using quality measures to identify areas where service users and people providing the service are having problems.
- Using lead measures to identify where you need to make improvements before problems happen rather than responding after they occur.

Questions to ask

- Do we have the information we need in our part of the service?
- Does our information help us understand the reasons for performance not just output?

Think about

- Whether you have the measures you need to decide how to improve your part of the service. It might not be the same information that you report routinely about performance.
- You can capture data on problems immediately. You do not need a sophisticated tool or approach to understand what stops you providing good service.

Gather and use information

You need the right information to fix problems for your service users

Challenge 1: Having the right information to identify what to improve

What does the right information look like?

You need the right information about what is and is not working to decide what to improve. Our 'using information' module of this good practice guide shares different approaches to using information for identifying and fixing problems. Examples include the following:

Balanced measures: Focusing on the quality of what you do enables you to think about how often you are delivering what is needed 'right first time'. Knowing how many outputs you produce, and at what cost, is not enough.

Lead measures: Lead measures help you predict what is likely to happen and to take action about performance ahead of time. Backward-looking lag measures allow you to report performance but are after the fact.

Measures throughout the process: Measuring the quality of what is happening at each process step, rather than just at the end of the process, provides more detailed information on where there are issues and what needs to change. You can see where issues occur rather than just where they become visible in the end-to-end process.

User focus: Measure what is important for service users and know whether you are providing what they need right first time. Service users will get a better, more efficient service and you will have fewer complaints to deal with.

Trend analysis: Statistical process control is one way of taking an evidenced approach to understanding and improving service performance. It helps you understand what type of change is needed and whether your changes make a difference.

Keep it simple: Large performance packs that measure everything create noise and effort. Focus on the 'must haves' that inform your decisions about what to improve.

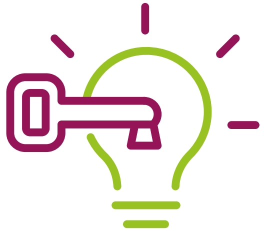
Keep in mind

- You can read more about all of these in our module on using information – click the home button on this page to view it.

Overview

Practical tips

Gather and use information



You need the right information to fix problems for your service users

Challenge 2: Getting routine feedback from people providing and using the service

If you get this right: you get the perspectives of people using the service, and your colleagues providing it, on what to improve. The improvements you make will benefit from experience of what the service is like for people using and providing it.

What works well:

- Using every interaction with people using the service as an opportunity to discover what works and what does not, rather than assuming what they want.
- Giving people a way to capture service user issues as they happen in order to inform real-time improvement, rather than gathering insight from separate exercises.
- Ensuring that you understand the experience of people using the service when you make changes to it so that you know how it will affect them and what will make it even better.

Questions to ask

- What options do you have in your organisation for testing service changes with the people who use them?

Think about

- The people who provide the service know most about what works and does not for users. You need ways to make sure that their voice is heard and not discounted by more senior people.
- Capturing issues is the first step. Do your ways of working then help you raise problems quickly with the people who can decide what to do about them?

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Challenge 2: Getting routine feedback from people providing and using the service

Problem capture templates

Front-line staff are best placed to identify issues that have a direct impact on the quality of service you provide to users. They see what causes rework and delays, and hear what is causing dissatisfaction. By capturing and analysing user feedback you can build evidence on what needs to change and see if those changes work.

Building evidence on problems helps you spend time fixing real issues. You can understand how often they occur and what the effect is – that might be cost, or time to do a workaround, or an impact on the person using the service. You can work out the benefit of fixing problems and use that to see if your solution makes a difference.

Capturing evidence can be as simple as a tally chart of how often something does not happen right first time. You can spot problems that do not happen often but are high impact, as well as those that happen a lot and do not have much impact. These smaller problems can add up and become big issues over time.

The insight helps you understand the real consequences of problems for service users. You can decide what to fix based on evidence rather than prioritising using perception.

Below is an example of an extract from a problem capture template.

Process area	Issue	Impact area – cost, delivery, quality, people	Number of occurrences this week	Effect/Effort to work around	Total impact
Communicating decision on application	Users contacting us to complain that they have not received a decision letter	Quality – unhappy users frustrated with service Delivery – spend time dealing with complaints and resending letter Cost – effort spent dealing with complaint and redoing work	17	20 minutes dealing with complaint 10 minutes to resend letter Unseen effort and frustration for user contacting us for information	8.5 hours staff time this week 17 unsatisfied service users

Keep in mind

- You can capture data on problems immediately. You do not need a sophisticated tool or approach to understand what stops you providing good service.
- Being clear on the consequence of the problem – the effort, time, cost or impact on service users – gets senior people interested in helping you to fix problems.

Overview

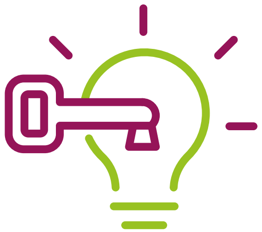
Practical tips

Gather and use information

Having the right information

Getting routine feedback

Taking a 'no blame' approach



You need the right information to fix problems for your service users

Challenge 3: Taking a 'no blame' approach to learning from performance information

If you get this right: you treat all performance information equally whether it tells you something positive or negative about the service. People are encouraged to speak up and to try new ways of working without fear of the consequences for them. You value evidence, rather than opinion, as the basis for your approach to achieving continuous improvement.

What works well:

- Talking to people using the service regularly about their experience of your service, what works well for them and what to change so you can learn and improve.
- Treating complaints from service users as a source of learning about what to improve rather than something to hide.
- Making it easy for people providing the service to raise problems as they occur.

Questions to ask

- How much time do we spend talking about performance information as a team compared to providing the service?
- How do we respond when someone shares something negative about service performance?
- Are we prepared to learn from how we are meeting the needs of all service users? For example, not just accepting that meeting 90% of service users' needs is 'good enough'.

Think about

- If you make it the norm that your team learns from performance information, people will feel that they can speak up and raise concerns without fear of blame or it being used against them.
- Interrogating customer complaints and feedback to understand what causes service issues most often.

Overview

Practical tips

Gather and use information

Having the right information

Getting routine feedback

Taking a 'no blame' approach

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Challenge 3: Taking a 'no blame' approach to learning from performance information

'Fail fast, fail forward'

'Fail fast, fail forward' is one approach that helps remove barriers to improving. It provides clarity for people on what type of improvements they can get on with, provided some simple tests are met, and it is the next step on from a 'no blame' approach to discussing performance. It encourages people to try ideas without fear of the personal risk or consequences if they do not work. See each idea you try as an experiment – share the learning so that new ideas benefit from your insight.

Be prepared to look for learning and improvement in different places. Think about the different types of ideas or experiments you can try:

- What can you try quickly at low cost?
- Is there a completely different way of looking at the issue?
- What is the most high-reward approach we can try?
- Is there something obvious that we think will work?
- Is there something that we think 'will never work'?
- How are we incorporating learning from previous experiments?

Keep in mind

- Approaches like 'fail fast, fail forward' still require people to feel safe in taking risks and admit where things have not gone to plan. The approach itself is only part of the answer.
- It is more difficult to create a team dynamic of speaking up and taking risks if these conditions are not established early in the life of a team.

Overview

Practical tips

Build capability and obligation to improve

Building improvement capability

Structured improvement approach

Making time for improvement

Getting leadership support

People need the skills, tools and time to improve services

Challenge 1: Building the capabilities needed to make improvements

If you get this right: you will back up your ambition to improve how you provide services by giving people the knowledge and skills to do it. You treat building improvement capability as an equal to the technical skills required to provide the service.

What works well:

- Giving all people providing services the necessary training in improvement approaches relevant to their role. For example, how to identify and solve day-to-day problems for people providing the service; and how to interpret data, such as using trend analysis, to spot and anticipate problems for people who manage services.
- Ensuring that new starters get this training too – they are in a great place to see problems you take for granted and to give you a fresh perspective on what you are doing.
- Making improvement part of what you do every day with your colleagues – seeing it as a capability to practice.

Questions to ask

- Do our people providing the service have the capabilities they need to capture and solve problems?
- Do our capability plans include the improvement skills and knowledge people need for each role?
- Do we have a way of improving that everyone in our team knows and uses?

Think about

- You need to spend time regularly applying problem-solving techniques to grow and maintain improvement capability – training the 'improvement muscle' helps it become second nature.

Overview | Case study | Practical tips

Build capability and obligation to improve

People need the skills, tools and time to improve services

Challenge 1: Building the capabilities needed to make improvements

Case study

The Department for Education (DfE): continuous improvement (CI) training and 'CI days'

Opportunity: DfE's school complaints team regularly deal with high volumes of cases and wanted to be sure that they made the best use of their resources to deal with them. They believe in fostering an attitude that, if staff do not understand something, they can not only ask about it but also challenge whether there is a better way of doing it. They were keen to make looking for improvements a fundamental part of the day job.

Approach: Service managers and team leaders underwent bespoke CI training and became CI Champions. They in turn led in-house training for team members, who were encouraged to attend – those who did became CI Practitioners. The training involved both theory and techniques for identifying root causes of problems and taking forward improvements. Refresher sessions are held regularly to ensure that awareness is maintained; new starters are also introduced to the CI concepts as part of their induction. CI days are held when the complaints team gets together to discuss their processes and brainstorm what they want to change. The results of this are improvement projects that individuals can take forward, as well as ideas they can work on with other parts of the department.

Benefit: DfE says that staff are complimentary about the training, which provides the confidence and tools to challenge how things are done, and that several improvements have been made to the complaints process as a result. DfE removed process steps that did not add value. They introduced a new 'light touch' way of dealing with certain types of complaints, which reduced the length of time it took to process them. They also took a new approach to getting good-quality customer feedback – by moving the request for feedback back a couple of weeks after the complaint decision was issued, they reduced the emotion associated with it and helped to clarify where the process could be improved. Involvement in CI activity also gives staff a chance to lead projects and learn new skills.

Build capability and obligation to improve

People need the skills, tools and time to improve services

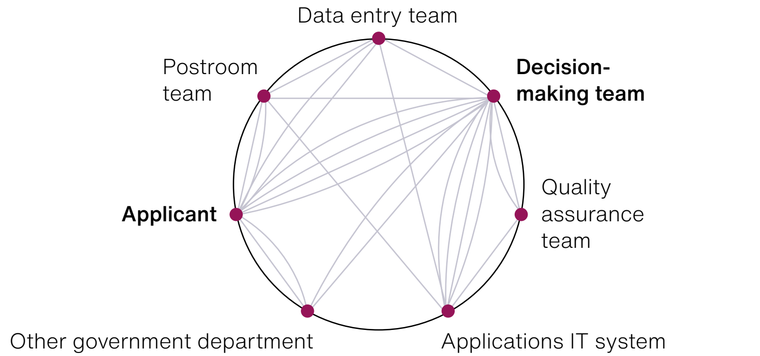
Challenge 1: Building the capabilities needed to make improvements

Basic techniques to help decide how to improve

Solving problems and improving services often combines a technical and a people challenge. Applying technical tools helps you understand problems better but, for example, a new process map does not change how people work. That said, there are many technical tools that you can learn to help you improve a service. They all have merit but should not be treated as a recipe to follow or as the only insight you need to solve a problem. Here are a few techniques to explore:

Information flow mapping: this shows how work moves through the service. It helps you see how many hand-offs there are and who has most burden in completing the process. Ideally, you want as few hand-offs as possible and to reduce burden where you can, particularly for service users.

Example information flow diagram



SIPOC (Supplier Input Process Output Customer): each row summarises a step in the process at a high level. It shows the inputs and outputs at each stage of the process, and who provides or receives them. You can use this approach to spot duplication, outputs that are not used and what is needed to complete the process right first time.

Example template for SIPOC

Supplier	Input	Process	Output	Customer
Who provides the inputs?	What inputs are provided to complete the process step (include what you used and did not)?	What is the process step?	What is produced from the process step?	Who is the output for? What are the characteristics of what they need and when?

Keep in mind

- Use the right tool and approach for the context. For example, just because you can create a process map does not mean you should or need to.
- See challenge one in our guide on using information: measures that matter for detail on understanding user experience.

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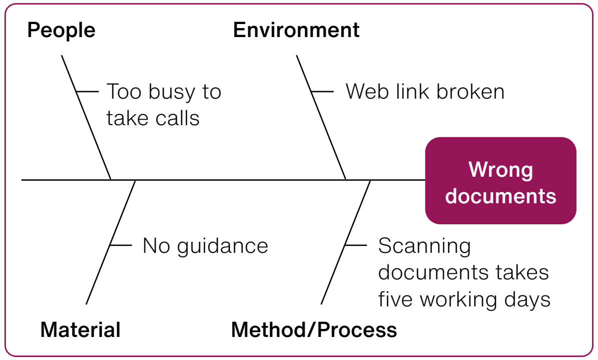
Root cause analysis: helps you identify potential causes of a problem and where you should focus your problem-solving work. You can use other techniques, such as 'five why' analysis, to investigate the individual issues in more detail.

An example of root cause analysis is shown on this page. In this example, a team is investigating why it is receiving the wrong documents as part of an application process.



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Structured improvement approach

Making time for improvement

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Challenge 2: Taking a structured approach to how you improve services

If you get this right: you will have ways of improving that all people providing the service know and understand. Everyone can contribute. The approaches are part of business-as-usual, ensuring that you continuously fix problems and improve the service. The changes that you make will be evidenced improvements, rather than guesses.

What works well:

- Choosing and adapting your approach for particular contexts, teams and problems – it does not have to be a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Taking the time to stand back and look at services from end-to-end, questioning what you do, why you do it and how you do it. Study and understand the service before changing it.
- Ensuring that you test changes with the people providing and using the service. Using what you learn to make changes that are better for everyone or to inform the trade-offs you make.
- Being clear on the purpose for improvement so you can judge whether changes are making progress towards that goal.

Questions to ask

- Are we clear on what types of changes people can just get on and do, and which need more formal sign-off?
- When was the last time we improved our approach to improving – how do we know it is still fit for purpose?

Think about

- Make sure that the people providing the service have an approach for capturing and solving problems. Problems can be fixed sooner and the experience for people using the service improves faster.

Overview

Practical tips

Build capability and obligation to improve

Building improvement capability

Structured improvement approach

Making time for improvement

Getting leadership support

People need the skills, tools and time to improve services

Challenge 2: Taking a structured approach to how you improve services

After action review

An after action review is an opportunity for a team to reflect on an event, project or activity in order to learn from their experience and interactions with each other.

It is a good way for people to share their experience of what it was like for them, and to build an understanding of the whole team's perspective on what actually happened.

It helps surface what went well and what did not, so that you can make changes to improve performance.

There are four simple questions that guide people through the review process.

After Action Review

What did we set out to do? →	What actually happened? →	Why were there differences? →	What can we learn from this?
What did we set out to do? What were our objectives? What were our measures of success?	What did we really achieve? Did we get what we wanted? Did the 'customer' get what they wanted? Were measures achieved (for example, quality and output)? Did everyone have a clear and common understanding of the objectives and their part in achieving them?	Why were there differences? • Positive differences • Negative differences	How can we build on the things that went well? What are the lessons we should capture and not forget? What useful things might we share with peers and colleagues? What are our next steps?

Keep in mind

- Do after action reviews as soon as you can while people's memories are fresh.
- You want to hear everyone's perspectives. Facilitate the session so that senior people do not dominate the discussion and findings.

Build capability and obligation to improve

People need the skills, tools and time to improve services

Challenge 2: Taking a structured approach to how you improve services

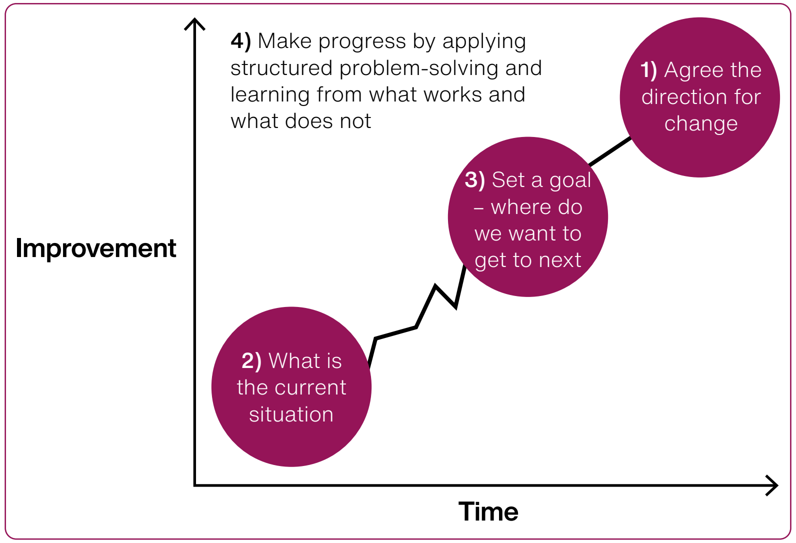
Structured problem-solving approach

A structured approach to problem-solving provides a way of thinking that everyone can use. Using a consistent approach makes it easier for everyone to contribute. There are some common characteristics that will help you understand problems and your ideas for solutions better. They also give you a way of measuring whether your changes are improvements for your organisation and service users.

The table below shows common stages of a structured problem-solving approach.

Stage	Sample questions to consider
Problem definition	What is the problem we are trying to fix for us and for our service users? What are the characteristics of the problem – for example, quality, output, cost or people issues?
Current state	What do we know about how the service works now?
Future state	If we solve the problem, what will be different? What will that mean for us and our service users?
Approach	What actions do we need to take to close the gap between the current state and the future state? What activity do we need – plan, do, study, adjust?
Issues and countermeasures	What will stop us from making progress and how can we contain the issues or solve them?
Timeline	What actions do we need to do and by when?
Benefits and measures	How will we know when we are done and measure whether we are making progress? How does this relate to the problem definition?

The four-step example below shows how you might achieve a long-term goal using incremental improvements.



Keep in mind

- Be as specific as possible about the problem, the current state, the future state, and the benefits so you will know if your changes are actually improvements.

Build capability and obligation to improve

People need the skills, tools and time to improve services

Challenge 3: Making the time for improvement

If you get this right: you treat improving as a priority, and people at all levels are given the time and space to do it. Your demand and capacity planning ensures that people have time to spend on improving the service as well as providing it.

What works well:

- Making small improvements to services every day rather than relying on time consuming one-off projects for step changes – the accumulation of incremental changes can be significant.
- Accounting for the practical reality of day-to-day demands on people providing services when thinking about the amount of improvement and change you make – what capacity do people have to learn new ways of working?
- Considering how to give status to improvement and how to build momentum. For example, to begin with, you might need to give some people 'lead' roles for improvement to help keep it on the agenda and protect time for doing it.

Questions to ask

- Do we all spend time each week working on improving the service we provide?
- Are our priorities for improving clear so that people know what is important and can get on with it?
- Do team managers have the capabilities they need – including understanding variation in demand, using data, and spotting and fixing problems?

Think about

- How you measure performance – judging people only on the output they produce encourages them to spend time on that, not on improving the service.
- Looking at the bigger picture rather than just doing today's work. Think about the longer-term benefits and return from spending time improving the service even if it causes service issues in the short term.

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Structured improvement approach

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Challenge 3: Making the time for improvement

Case study

HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC): '3 I' forum (Information, Insight, Improve)

Opportunity: HMRC's PAYE applications team has used several different approaches for continuously improving services over the years, each having its own advantages and disadvantages. HMRC felt there was an opportunity to adopt a more effective and consistent approach to implementing service improvements.

Approach: The team implemented a new approach to improving called '3 I' (Information, Insight, Improve). Anyone, of any grade, who has had an idea to make an improvement is supported to gather evidence and have it evaluated at a monthly forum. The forum is made up of a range of different stakeholders that cover different perspectives, such as digital, customer and particular subject matter experts. The people on the forum decide between ideas based on feasibility and the likely return on investment (which can include non-financial benefits, such as improved service). The people who submit ideas are provided with feedback on the results of the discussion.

Benefit: Representatives from HMRC's PAYE applications team told us that the forum provides a much more structured approach to improvement than existed previously. Because the forum sees all ideas, it is well placed to ensure that good ideas are prioritised on a consistent basis, using a diversity of perspectives. As well as identifying process improvements, HMRC says that getting staff involved with change is good for their morale – they know they are being listened to.

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Structured improvement approach

Making time for improvement

Getting leadership support

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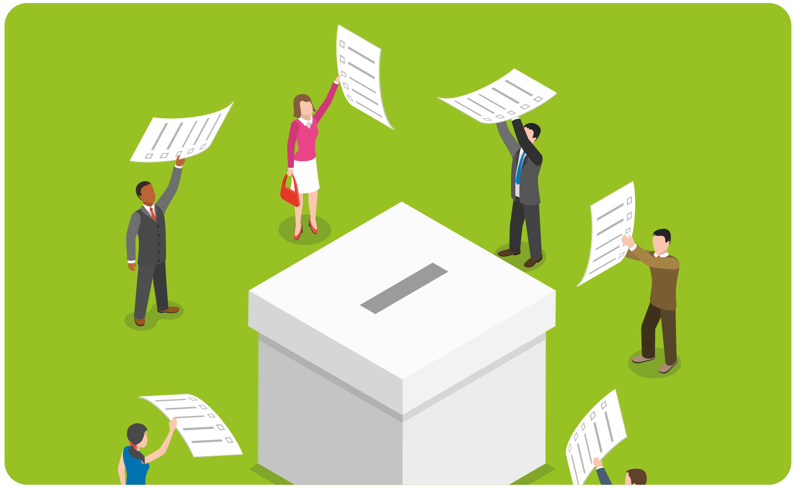
Challenge 3: Making the time for improvement

Aligning improvement intent and daily work

All organisations say they want to improve. But you need to match that stated intent with behaviours that show that improvement is important. For example, the focus of conversations in your team and how people end up spending their time matter. Sometimes there are physical indicators or daily rituals that reveal whether there is a genuine improvement mindset. Some examples of misalignment between improvement intent and behaviours are:



Team information boards which are all backwards looking, and which focus solely on output, do not help identify the causes of problems or encourage forward-looking conversations on how to fix them. Think about including quality measures throughout the process in your performance information to help you spot problems before they happen and discuss how you might address them.

Performance management frameworks which are dominated by people's contribution to outputs will affect how people choose to spend their time. Think about including a focus on how people contribute to improvement work, their insights about improving the quality of service, and how they collaborate and share knowledge with colleagues about improving.

Staff suggestion boxes can make it appear that someone else decides what needs to be fixed rather than involving everyone. While good intentioned, people can lose faith that their ideas are valued if the boxes are opened infrequently or few problems are fixed. People will stop using them. If you use suggestion boxes, make it clear what the priority is for improving, and involve the people who do the process in deciding what ideas to take forward. Also, make sure people know what they can get on with and try without approval (see practical tip on taking a no-blame approach).

Keep in mind

- Think about your team's daily, weekly and monthly routines. When can you have forward-looking discussions about improving?

Overview | Case study | Practical tips

Build capability and obligation to improve

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Challenge 4: Getting leadership support for improvement

If you get this right: you can, and are supported to, make improvements. Managers create the conditions that allow improvement to happen rather than just saying it is important. You have approaches to influencing and gaining managerial support for your improvement ideas.

What works well:

- Agreeing explicit objectives within your team, or individually, to improve the service. This gives you licence to work on improving services and to hold people in more senior roles accountable for supporting that goal.
- Using an evidence-based approach to make the case for changes to services. Showing your manager the evidence of the problem and benefits from fixing it makes a more credible case.
- Using learning and examples from other organisations to demonstrate the benefits from improvements to your manager. Use these to get their support to experiment with new ideas and improvement approaches in your own organisation.

Questions to ask

- What benefits are your manager interested in and how do your ideas for improving contribute to that goal too?

Think about

- Building an evidence base of service problems to fix as part of business-as-usual work providing the service, rather than having to invest in separate projects to make the case for changes.
- Whether team and individual performance goals include objectives on improving.

Build capability and obligation to improve

People need the skills, tools and time to improve services

Challenge 4: Getting leadership support for improvement

Overcoming the HiPPO

The HiPPO is an acronym for the 'Highest Paid Person's Opinion'. It can be common to decide how to improve based on the instincts, gut feelings, convictions and beliefs of the most senior person involved. However, they are often not working with service users day-to-day. They may not see what causes service users' problems and the frustrations of people providing the service. You need a way to ensure that you use the knowledge of the people providing the service when deciding what problems to fix.

Using evidence is one way of overcoming the HiPPO. Being clear on the consequences of the problem – the effort, time, cost or impact on service users – gets senior people interested in helping you fix problems.

It requires the people providing the service to collect good-quality evidence on:

- what the problems are;
- how often those problems happen;
- what the impact of those problems is (impact on quality, delivery, cost, people); and
- how those problems have an impact on the service issues that concern the HiPPO the most.

Problem capture templates help you collect that evidence.

Below is an example of an extract from a problem capture template.

Process area	Issue	Impact area – cost, delivery, quality, people	Number of occurrences this week	Effect/Effort to work around	Total impact
Communicating decision on application	Users contacting us to complain that they have not received a decision letter	Quality – unhappy users frustrated with service Delivery – spend time dealing with complaints and resending letter Cost – effort spent dealing with complaint and redoing work	17	20 minutes dealing with complaint 10 minutes to resend letter Unseen effort and frustration for user contacting us for information	8.5 hours staff time this week 17 unsatisfied service users

Keep in mind

- You can capture data on problems immediately. You do not need a sophisticated tool or approach to understand what stops you providing a good service.
- Behaviours matter too when overcoming the HiPPO. A successful outcome is more likely where people feel they can speak up and challenge without fear of the consequences.

Get the right people involved

Using multi-disciplinary teams

Improving is everyone's job

You need to make it possible for everyone to contribute

Challenge 1: Using multi-disciplinary teams to understand issues and fix problems

If you get this right: your understanding of problems and ideas on improving are informed by a diversity of knowledge, experience and perspectives from people in different roles across the organisation. They share an understanding of what matters to improve the service and that is more important than any individual or team goal. They come together formally and informally to share knowledge and improve services.

What works well:

- Creating ways for people providing services to share knowledge, raise problems and work on how they think about solving them. For example, networks and forums for people that work on the end-to-end service.
- Making it easy for people to find out who does what in different parts of the organisation so that they can talk together when they need to.
- Being curious – ask people in other parts of the service if you are giving them what they need and share feedback on what is working or not working for you.

Questions to ask

- Are we involving people in problem-solving who have different roles in the end-to-end service? For example, these might include people in operations, policy, digital, legal and those with first-hand experience of the service problems.
- Do we have a way of agreeing what our shared priority is for improving the end-to-end service?

Think about

- Be willing to be challenged about your understanding of service problems and your ideas for improvement. A diversity of input makes you consider different perspectives and makes it more likely that improvements will be as effective as intended.

Get the right people involved

You need to make it possible for everyone to contribute

Challenge 1: Using multi-disciplinary teams to understand issues and fix problems

Case study

Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) Winter Fuel: using front-line staff to identify priority problems to fix

Problem: DWP's new Winter Fuel service was introduced in 2020. It required DWP to transfer 11.5 million customers onto a new database. The service was developed in an 'agile' way and was not fully built upon its introduction. There were lots of challenges and workarounds for staff. There was also potential for things to go wrong, including the possibility of payments going to the wrong accounts.

Approach: DWP used staff input as to how the service was performing. Weekly updates and 'meet and greets' were held with all staff to capture issues. DWP used Microsoft Teams chat groups to understand the impact of issues in different Winter Fuel teams. The digital team sat alongside Winter Fuel teams to see how they were using the system and to better understand the problems. Productivity was monitored for further clues about the types of issues people were having. The Winter Fuel teams worked closely with the digital team to prioritise and fix issues in real time.

Benefit: DWP says that involving front-line staff was critical to identifying and fixing issues. As a result of the reduction in the number of issues to deal with, DWP says it was able to return people earlier to different parts of the business. It is now better able to forecast the amount of effort it needs to meet demand. DWP says that far fewer incorrect payments were made to customers than it initially predicted.

Get the right people involved

Using multi-disciplinary teams

Improving is everyone's job

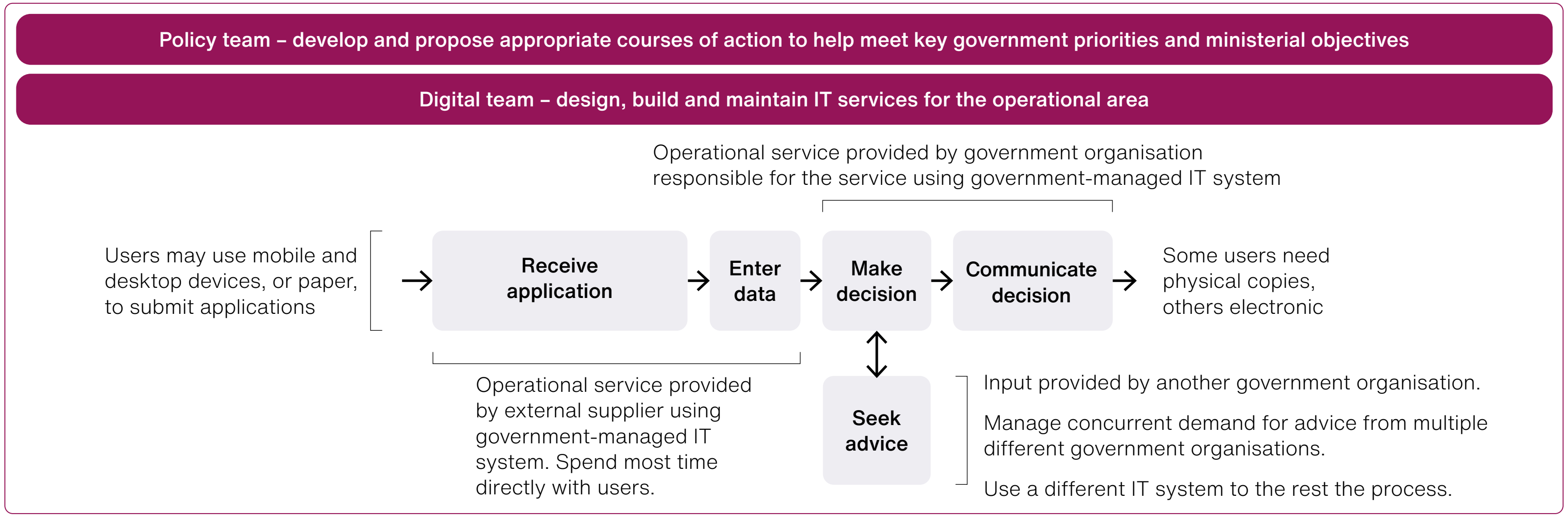
You need to make it possible for everyone to contribute

Challenge 1: Using multi-disciplinary teams to understand issues and fix problems

Involving people from different backgrounds to solve service problems

Solving end-to-end service problems is tricky. There is no one person or role in the service that understands all the detail about how the service works or the implications of changes. There are lots of different perspectives to consider when deciding what to change. Involving people from different backgrounds brings a richer range of thought to improving services. Changes are more likely to work right first time and you will spot and fix teething problems earlier.

The example below is a common scenario in government of some of the different roles that inform service decisions or are affected by them. It shows why it is important to include people from different backgrounds and parts of your service in your improvement work.



Keep in mind

- Be clear on what kind of problems people can just get on with fixing.
- People need to know the current ways to share information with other parts of the end-to-end process, and to escalate problems.

Overview | Case study | Practical tips

Get the right people involved

Using multi-disciplinary teams

Improving is everyone's job

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Challenge 2: Making improvement part of everyone's job

If you get this right: everyone is invested in making things better – for the service user and the people providing the service. People providing the service get what they need to improve it, including skills and support from colleagues, and improving is considered part of the day job.

What works well:

- Recognising that people providing the service know the day-to-day problems and are subject matter experts. Use their ideas and enthusiasm for making things work better.
- Being willing to let people try new ways of doing things – even though they will not all work. Learn from failed experiments for the next improvement.
- Making improvement part of the expectation of 'how we work round here' from induction for new starters to ongoing learning and development. Applying improvement thinking repeatedly will make it second nature.

Questions to ask

- Is it clear what is in our gift to improve? If not, agree the parameters in your team so there are no unnecessary barriers to people trying new ideas.
- How much time do we spend talking in our teams each week about improvement ideas?

Think about

- Make it easy for people to contribute to improving services. Not all types of approaches to improvement need specialist skills or experience. Suggesting that it does may discourage some people from contributing.

Get the right people involved

Using multi-disciplinary teams

Improving is everyone's job

You need to make it possible for everyone to contribute

Challenge 3: Taking a 'no blame' approach to learning from performance information

'Fail fast, fail forward'

'Fail fast, fail forward' is one approach that helps remove barriers to improving. It provides clarity for people on what type of improvements they can get on with, provided some simple tests are met, and it is the next step on from a 'no blame' approach to discussing performance. It encourages people to try ideas without fear of the personal risk or consequences if they do not work. See each idea you try as an experiment – share the learning so that new ideas benefit from your insight.

Be prepared to look for learning and improvement in different places. Think about the different types of ideas or experiments you can try:

- What can you try quickly at low cost?
- Is there a completely different way of looking at the issue?
- What is the most high-reward approach we can try?
- Is there something obvious that we think will work?
- Is there something that we think 'will never work'?
- How are we incorporating learning from previous experiments?

Keep in mind

- Approaches like 'fail fast, fail forward' still require people to feel safe in taking risks and admit where things have not gone to plan. The approach itself is only part of the answer.
- It is more difficult to create a team dynamic of speaking up and taking risks if these conditions are not established early in the life of a team.

Learn and improve across boundaries

Improving across teams

Sharing learning internally

Learning across organisations

You need to fix problems and share learning with others

Challenge 1: Making improvements to services that involve multiple teams

If you get this right: you can address problems where multiple teams, including in multiple organisations, have a role in providing the end-to-end service. You are better able to work together for the common goal of improving services for users. Teams are prepared to change how they work in their part of the process to improve the overall service provided.

What works well:

- Tracking if you get what you need to do your part of the process. Using this information to see more quickly where issues occur in the end-to-end service and fixing them at source.
- Building relationships and talking with people who do earlier and later parts of the end-to-end service about the impact of process problems, and creating a shared desire to fix them.
- Setting up or joining end-to-end service networks to work together on problem-solving.
- Holding knowledge-sharing sessions and running training courses for other teams to help them understand how they have an impact on your work and to improve the quality of input to your part of the service.

Questions to ask

- How often do we spend time seeing how people in other parts of the service work and how they think about improving?
- Do we have a way of working on shared problems with teams in other parts of the service?

Think about

- Are you explicit about what you need from other teams to do your part of the service well? Do not just assume they know.

Learn and improve across boundaries

You need to fix problems and share learning with others

Challenge 1: Making improvements to services that involve multiple teams

Quality of input, process and output

A lot must go right for a service user to get the service they expect – for example, a team processing an application needs to have the right inputs from the service user, other teams and even other organisations. Measuring performance of the process only at the end will not help you understand why or where problems occur. By measuring the quality of input, quality of process and quality of output, all the way through, rather than just at the end of the process, you get more detailed information on where there are issues and what needs to change.

1 **Quality of input:**

- Is it clear what I need to carry out my part of the process and when?
- How often do I get what I need in order to carry out my part of the process right first time?

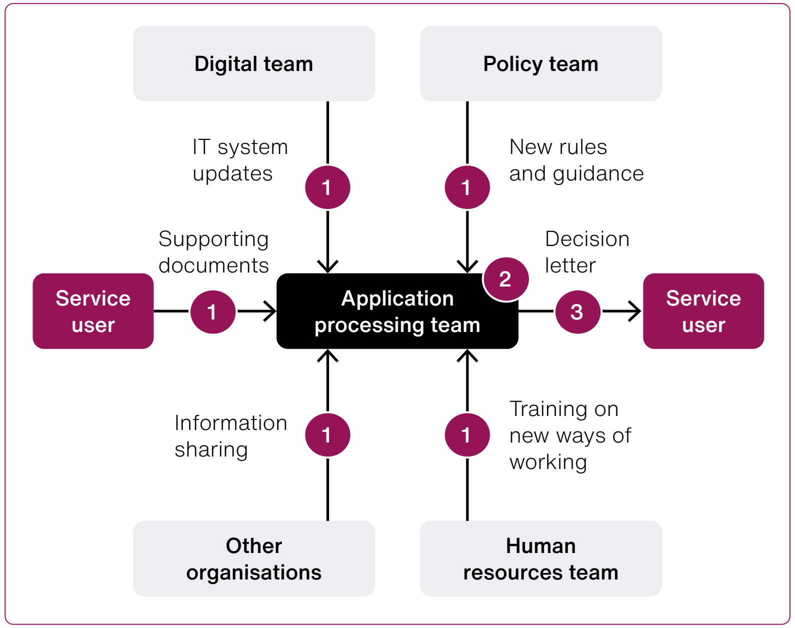
2 **Quality of process:**

- Are we following the expected process?
- Is it producing the expected outputs?

3 **Quality of output:**

- Is it clear what the next person in the process needs from me, and when?
- How often do I give the next person in the process what they need in order to do their part right first time?

The diagram shows a high-level example of this for an application process.



Keep in mind

- You do not need an IT system to measure quality – a simple approach, such as using problem capture templates, can reveal issues to investigate.
- It is easier to measure quality if you agree what good looks like in the first place – particularly hand-offs between different teams or across organisation boundaries.

Overview

Practical tips

Learn and improve across boundaries

You need to fix problems and share learning with others

Challenge 2: Sharing learning across your organisation

If you get this right: you look for opportunities to share learning across your organisation to improve services. You learn from how people provide similar services and from how people approach managing and improving different services. Everyone providing services benefits from knowledge and experience about what works and what does not.

What works well:

- Providing structured and informal ways to share knowledge and insight on improving services such as forums, online collaboration and training.
- Sharing what is obvious or normal to you in how you provide your service – it may not be obvious or normal for people in other teams.
- Getting out and spending time with teams in other parts of your organisation to get a first-hand understanding of how they work.

Questions to ask

- Do we know who else in our organisation has insight into problems with how the service is provided? For example, complaints teams can help us see what is not working for people using the service.

Think about

- How frequently you need to share insight and learning across your organisation. The more people who use your service each day, the greater the potential benefit from sharing learning frequently.

Learn and improve across boundaries

Keep in mind

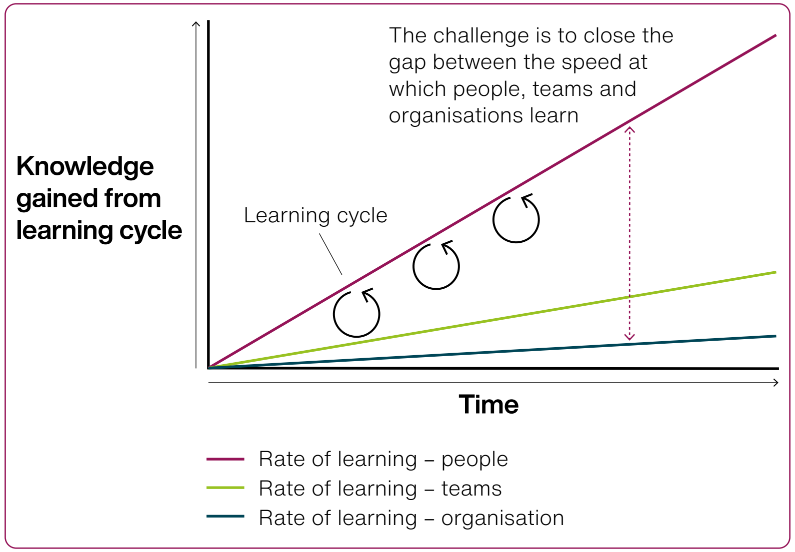
- Think about what might encourage people to share their knowledge. For example how to create trust and a willingness to share and learn from failure.

You need to fix problems and share learning with others

Challenge 2: Sharing learning across your organisation

Closing the gap between the rate at which people, teams and organisations learn

People providing a service learn quickly about what is working and what is not. They are closest to the service user, and are using the service's IT systems and processes. Each time they provide the service, they learn more about better ways of doing the work. The risk is that their team learns at a slower rate and only one person knows about that 'better way'. It can be even harder to know what people are learning in different teams across your organisation.



So the problem becomes: how do you help everyone benefit from the knowledge people gain from providing the service? If you can close the gap between the rate at which people, teams and organisations learn, you can improve the service for all users more quickly.

Improving how you share knowledge and learning is not a quick fix or easy to do. It is a complex subject and needs people to be prepared to 'share what they know'.

The following are some practical actions that can help create situations where people are encouraged to share their experiences:

- After action reviews that allow everyone to share their perspective and experience of doing work (see our insight on building capability and obligation to improve).
- Providing places and time for people to talk about their work with their colleagues.
- Giving people the opportunity to spend time working alongside other teams.
- Team problem-solving sessions that provide space for people to share their experiences.

Learn and improve across boundaries

You need to fix problems and share learning with others

Challenge 3: Sharing learning across different organisations

If you get this right: people using the service benefit from the collective knowledge, experience and improvements made by people providing services in other organisations. You see how others are innovating and can learn from it and adapt it for your service. The opportunities to share ideas and learn from the benefits of change are significant.

What works well:

- Cross-organisation networks that bring together people providing similar services – both 'back-office' services such as recruitment and external user-facing services such as complaints and processing applications.
- Giving people the opportunity to spend time working in other organisations. For example, job swaps can be a good way to spread understanding and share learning.
- Sharing what is obvious or normal to you in how you provide your service – it may not be obvious or normal for people in other organisations.

Questions to ask

- Do we know who in government provides a similar service and are we connected with them?
- Are we sharing our knowledge in cross-organisation groups. If no group exists – can I start one?

Think about

- The service you provide might be different from those provided by other organisations, but the challenges and how you think about them are often similar. For example, you can learn from how people approach analysing demand, designing service measures and building improvement capability.

Learn and improve across boundaries

Improving across teams

Sharing learning internally

Learning across organisations

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Challenge 3: Sharing learning across different organisations

Case study

Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC): a joined-up approach to learning in the administration of the Levelling Up Fund

Opportunity: The Levelling Up Fund is a large fund that is jointly managed by DLUHC, HM Treasury and the Department for Transport. The first round of applications for funding was in 2021, with a total of £1.7 billion in grants being paid out. The departments recognised that there was an opportunity to learn from the first round and make improvements to how applicants submitted their bids for round two in 2022, and how officials processed them.

Approach: The lessons learned from an after-activity review were combined with lessons that had been shared from other application assessment processes within the departments. This helped the departments identify areas to focus on including frameworks and clear technical guidance for applicants, a digital portal for applications, financial due diligence, coordinating the assessment process across departments, resourcing and joint ways of working.

Informal working groups were set up with representatives across the three departments to progress these areas. Each workstream reported into regular cross-departmental meetings at a more senior level.

Benefit: Representatives from DLUHC told us that this approach to improvement facilitated the sharing of learning. It enabled the departments to break down the work into manageable chunks and allocate responsibility for it. It allowed them to bring in appropriate expertise from outside, such as digital capability. DLUHC believe that the changes introduced will make the second round of applications go more smoothly than the first from both the perspectives of the applicants and the departments involved.

Learn and improve across boundaries

Improving across teams

Sharing learning internally

Learning across organisations

Keep in mind

- Bringing together people who work in different parts of your organisation, and from other organisations, is a good way to get fresh perspectives on how and why things are done. Their input can help you challenge your preconceived 'why'.

You need to fix problems and share learning with others

Challenge 3: Sharing learning across different organisations

Double loop thinking – challenging 'why' we do something

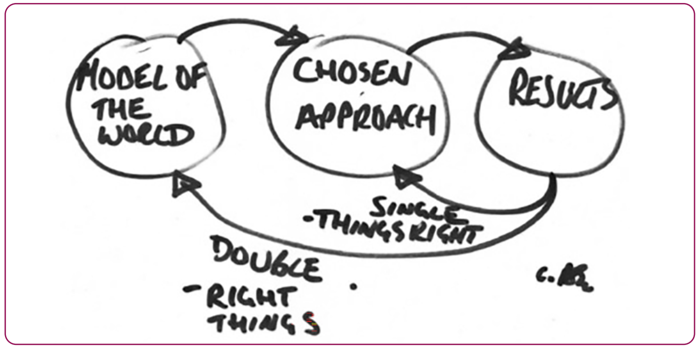
It can be tempting to just think about **what** we do when looking to improve. If we use the same approach to providing a service for a long time it can be difficult to bring a fresh perspective and think about why we do it. Focusing improvement on the **why** is often described as double loop thinking.

Doing things right is single loop thinking. It is about improving your chosen approach to providing the service and getting more efficient at what you do. For example, you might choose to improve how you manage complaints, so that you can respond more quickly and with less effort.

Doing the right things is double loop thinking. It is about challenging your model of the world and why you do an activity – improving efficiency by doing the things that matter. In the example above, you might step back and consider how the whole service operates – if you fix the source of the complaints, the speed of dealing with them will not be an issue.

Some questions to consider when applying double loop thinking:

- What is our service user actually trying to do compared with what we are choosing to provide – what is 'the right thing' for them?
- How does our objective need to change?
- What are our assumptions about our objective?
- Who might we involve from other organisations that can bring a different perspective?
- How might we need to change the way we go about solving problems?



Overview | Case study | Practical tips