CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# SELECTING THEMES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Chapter Purpose

Aim. To select a worthy theme on which to focus improvement actions based on assessments made using the 5 P's, on organizational strategy, and on consideration of national or professional guidelines and recommendations.

    Objectives. At the completion of this unit, you will be able to

- Define a theme for improvement.
- Describe the benefit of identifying a theme for improvement.

- Describe what to consider when selecting a theme for improvement.
- Describe how theme selection is connected to assessment information and data.
- Identify where theme selection fits in the overall improvement process.
- Describe the process of identifying and selecting a theme for improvement.

After assessing the microsystem and considering organizational strategies and priorities along with external recommendations, your lead improvement team should choose one theme to focus improvement activities on (see Figure 15.1). Other themes can be identified and addressed later.

FIGURE 15.1. IMPROVEMENT RAMP: THEME.
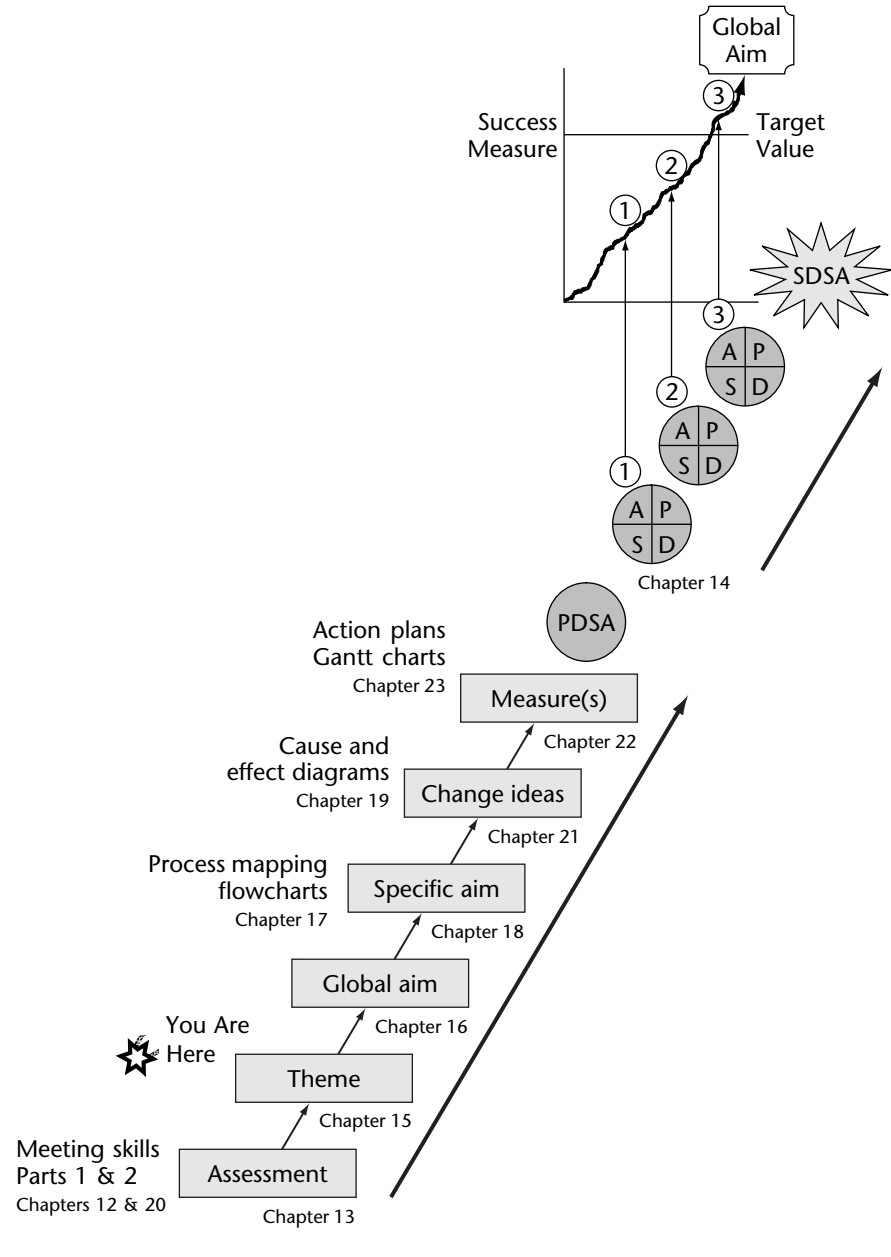
What Is a Theme for Improvement?

A *theme for improvement* is a broad and worthwhile area in which to begin your improvement work. You choose it by looking at assessment information and by considering such other factors as strategic priorities that come from senior leaders. The theme gives your microsystem a major focus to guide its improvement activity.

Why Use a Theme?

Kerr White, a notable figure in the field of health services research, often asked, "How do you eat an elephant?" Then he would answer his own question: "One bite at a time" (personal communication to E. C. Nelson, 1982). Selecting a single worthy theme to focus improvement on is a one-bite-at-a-time approach to change, allowing you to change one part of a system at a time while still recognizing that much more improvement, perhaps even whole microsystem improvement, may really be needed.

Many of us would often like to change everything at once, but this is only rarely possible. Usually, we are better off trying to make improvements on a vital part of our system and thereby fit improvement work into ongoing clinical or operational work. Once you review your 5 P's data and information, personal experiences, what you and the members of the microsystem know intuitively, what you know from your engagement with the relevant scientific literature, and what the larger system is asking your microsystem to do, you will find there are many broad areas that could benefit from improvement.

A good way to start the theme selection process is to create a list of themes. When you do this, it is wise to engage everyone, seeking all members' ideas and interpretations of the assessment data and information. Then, after considering many themes, it is best to select one theme for an exclusive initial improvement focus and thus avoid the distraction arising from an awareness of the enormity of the improvement possibilities.

What Are the Theme Selection Considerations?

To develop ideas for worthy themes, take into consideration

- Your 5 P's assessment data and information
- Your performance metrics and gaps between your results and best-practice results

- Your staff views of what is "intolerable" in daily practice
- Your patient and family views of what is delightful and what is unacceptable in the delivery of care and services
- Your organization's strategic goals and priorities

Aligning your microsystem's improvement themes with the macrosystem's strategic priorities will attract helpful resources for the changes you seek, while also supporting the entity-wide achievement of important goals and the improved performance of your microsystem.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) report *Crossing the Quality Chasm* (Institute of Medicine [U.S.], Committee on Quality of Health Care in America, 2001) recommends examining six quality dimensions when working to improve health care: (1) safety, (2) effectiveness, (3) patient-centeredness, (4) timeliness, (5) efficiency, and (6) equity. These dimensions offer important starting places as you focus and choose where to begin.

Many professional groups have adopted important visionary goals that can also serve as microsystem improvement themes. For example, the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (2005, p. 4) has created these "seven worthy goals" to guide improvements at Cystic Fibrosis Centers:

1. Patients and families are full partners with the Cystic Fibrosis care team. Care will be respectful of individual patient preferences, needs, and values.
2. Children and adolescents will have normal growth and nutrition. Adults' nutrition will be maintained as near normal as possible.
3. All patients will receive appropriate therapies for maintaining lung function and reducing acute episodes of infection.
4. Clinicians and patients will be well-informed partners in reducing acquisition of respiratory pathogens, particularly P. aeruginosa and B. cepacia.
5. Patients will be screened and managed aggressively for complications of CF, particularly CF-related diabetes.
6. Severely affected patients will be well supported by their CF team in facing decisions about transplantation and end-of-life care.
7. Patients will have access to appropriate therapies, treatments, and supports regardless of race, age, education, or ability to pay.

Another useful model for theme selection comes from the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's Idealized Design of Clinical Office Practice (IDCOP) program, which revolves around four broad themes: access, interaction, reliability, and vitality. The model displays these key themes and their relationship to ideal

FIGURE 15.2. KEY THEMES AND COMPONENTS
OF IDEAL PRACTICES.

"They give me exactly the help I want (and need) exactly when I want (and need) it."

ACCESS	INTERACTION	RELIABILITY	VITALITY
Open access	Customized communication	Knowledge management	Research & development
Continuous flow	Interaction technology	Population management	Staff development

ALTERNATIVES TO 1:1 VISITS

OPTIMIZED CARE TEAM/MASTER SCHEDULES

LEADERSHIP/MEASUREMENT SYSTEMS AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Source: Institute for Healthcare Improvement, 2000. Used with permission.

practices (Figure 15.2). It may be helpful for initiating your lead improvement team's thinking about a theme to select as its starting point. Use a theme that helps everyone realize the importance and *sensibility* of his or her work on improving care.

What Process Can You Use to Generate Theme Ideas and Select a First Theme?

Once you have gathered all the information and data from assessing your microsystem and have taken into consideration the additional perspectives mentioned previously, your team can generate an inclusive list of possibilities by conducting a brainstorming session. It can then select a theme from the brainstorming results by following a multi-voting process (see Chapter Twenty for details on both these techniques). Brainstorming can engage all members of your team in discussing and buying into the improvement focus. Be sure to keep the list of brainstormed ideas for future reference and consideration.

What Are the Next Steps?

After selecting a theme for improvement, you will want to further define the particular starting point for your change efforts. You can do this by developing a global aim and related specific aims as targets for your improvement work.

Case Studies

Intermediate Cardiac Care Unit (ICCU)

After analyzing their 5 P's assessment and considering their new observations and views about the ICCU, the ICCU lead improvement team members selected the theme of communication in the ICCU for their initial improvement work. Communication is a very broad theme that influences many things, such as safety, relationships with patients and families, interactions between professionals, and work that goes between the ICCU and departments such as admitting and the catheterization laboratory. Communication was selected because it has a profound effect on the flow of patients into and out of the ICCU and also on the flow of daily care.

Plastic Surgery Section

After reviewing their 5 P's, the metrics that matter, and other assessment tools, the Plastic Surgery Section's lead improvement team members identified the following broad themes for potential improvement:

- Understanding each other's work: optimization of roles
- Understanding core and supporting processes
- Professional development and growth: for all on the team
- Building and maintaining safety and trust
- Timely access for our patients: understanding and balancing the schedule of outpatient appointments, minor surgery cases, and main operating room cases

Through discussions and identification of important linkages to the organization's strategic plans, the lead improvement team members chose the theme of *access* to work on first. They kept their original list to use when considering future improvement themes.

Review Questions

1. What is a theme for improvement, and why have one?
2. What should you consider when selecting a theme for improvement?
3. Where does theme selection fit in the overall improvement process?
4. How might you select a theme for improvement?
5. What are the next steps after you have selected a theme?

Between Sessions Work

Select a theme to focus your improvement work; base your choice on

1. Your 5 P's assessment data and information
2. A review of information from external forces, such as the Institute of Medicine, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, and the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations
3. A review of your own organization's strategic priorities

References

Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. (2005, June). *Cystic Fibrosis Foundation opportunity statement.* Bethesda, MD: Author.

Institute for Healthcare Improvement. (2000). *Idealized design of clinical office practices.* Boston: Author.

Institute of Medicine (U.S.), Committee on Quality of Health Care in America. (2001). *Crossing the quality chasm: A new health system for the 21st century.* Washington, DC: National Academies Press.