



Leadership Challenges

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) *Paths to Recovery* national program taught leaders in substance abuse treatment agencies to use process improvement strategies originally developed by private industry to improve their business operations. These strategies emphasized incremental changes that were tested, revised, retested and adopted in a series of rapid-cycle changes.

Although these strategies emphasized incremental, small-scale changes, they brought about systemwide transformations that addressed big problems that keep the CEO awake at night. Agency leaders and their staff learned to apply process improvement techniques that both improved the quality of services and stabilized the organization's finances.

NIATx (Network for Improvement of Addiction Treatment) served as the national program office for *Paths to Recovery*. Some 26 agencies became NIATx partners via *Paths to Recovery*.

Starting at the Top: The Role of the Executive Sponsor

In the NIATx model of process improvement, agency staff form change teams to achieve four NIATx aims: reduce wait time for services, reduce no shows, increase admissions and improve retention in care. An executive sponsor, usually the executive director, leads the team by ensuring that they have the resources and time to succeed.

The executive sponsor should be "passionate about change" according to NIATx staff. He or she should provide a "steady drumbeat" that reverberates through the organization, motivating staff at all levels. A key role of the Executive Sponsor is to choose and support the right in-house Change Leader, the person in charge of day to day change activities. Still, the Executive Sponsor needs to be a champion of change.

NIATx staff identified several ways that an Executive Sponsor can foster organizational receptiveness to change. These include impromptu visits to team meetings, reading and commenting on minutes of team meetings and rewarding and acknowledging "heroes."

What if the Executive Sponsor "Doesn't Get It"?

Some *Paths to Recovery* Executive Sponsors became champions right away. Nancy Paull, executive director of Stanley Street Treatment and Resources (SSTAR) in Fall

River, Mass., was frustrated with traditional total quality management approaches and knew "there must be a better way."

According to Paull, "We were used to total quality management and CQI (continuous quality improvement) approaches. You'd sit in meetings and nothing changed. You have 10 to 12 people in the room, the most expensive people in your organization, the value of their time had to be \$2000 or more, and nothing changed." Paull was intrigued by the hands-on, quick-turnaround approach fostered by *Paths to Recovery* and decided to apply. Learn more about Paull's experiences in *Paths to Recovery*.

Other leaders embraced the NIATx model more slowly. Sometimes an executive who resisted at the start did eventually "take off," according to Jay Ford, a NIATx coach who advised and guided agencies in using process improvement strategies. Tim Smith, executive director at Daybreak in Spokane, Wash., is a case in point. Smith "struggled with the NIATx model of incremental rapid-cycle changes and hesitated to become actively engaged. Then, a light turned on and he got it."

Since NIATx offers a range of learning resources—formal learning sessions, teleconferences, coaching and informal peer networking, the switch that caused the light to go on could have been any one or a cluster of factors. Whatever the cause, says Ford, Smith is going "great guns."

Pauley Johnson, NIATx coach, also saw the transformation in Smith. Johnson observes "He [Smith] saw a real effect on his bottom line. NIATx improved the productivity and efficiency of Daybreak staff. They were able to see more people without any degradation in quality in quality of care."

Data and the ability to "tell stories" with data also played a part in converting Smith to the NIATx approach. According to Johnson, in reviewing data on staff productivity, Smith saw that some people had "stunningly better results than others had. He got staff together to talk about specific things they were doing right that others could use."

[Learn more](#) about Daybreak's involvement in *Paths to Recovery*.

When Leaders Move On, What Then?

When an executive director or executive sponsor leaves the agency, it is easy for things to revert to prior practice. To avoid losing the hard-earned gains of process improvement, the executive sponsor should ensure that systems are in place to institutionalize change and embed a culture of change in the routines of staff throughout the agency.

Two important actions a departing executive can take to sustain the gains, according to NIATx staff, are:

- Appointing a "sustain leader" who will take over monitoring activities after a change team has completed its work on a change project.
- Making sure change teams document the changes they have put in place. This can include writing new policies or protocols, for example, or training all affected staff in the new procedures.

Even when such measures are in place, process improvement can be disrupted or derailed when a chief executive who has been a NIATx champion leaves and is not replaced by someone receptive to the rapid-cycle model.

Coach Elizabeth Strauss recalls a difficult situation involving a new executive director who "didn't get" process improvement. The director attended a NIATx Change Leaders Summit and Strauss was set to follow-up with individual coaching. However, before that happened, the agency's board of directors became tired of waiting for the "NIATx light" to turn on and asked the director to leave.

Three employees of this agency had become strong advocates of the NIATx model and could have sustained the momentum. Instead, perceiving that their agency was no longer an environment where performance improvement was embraced, these employees resigned to start their own spinoff agency.

"This was an unusual case, says Strauss. "In some ways it was really cool how performance improvement had gotten so ingrained that three people took that step." However, it also highlights the pitfalls that can occur during times of transition.

Ford takes the "30,000-foot view" when it comes to turnover. When executive sponsors do leave, their departure does not have to mean the initiative has ended or that it has less priority. The Jackie Nitschke Center is a small treatment agency in Green Bay, Wis. When the executive director retired, changes made as a result of rapid-cycle projects began to erode. The board of directors appointed William LaBine, who had been the agency's change leader, as the new director, and he got things moving forward again.

[Learn more](#) about the Jackie Nitschke Center's involvement in *Paths to Recovery*.

"Everybody hits a bump in road," says Ford, "but the sites do get it and are making great strides." Many executive directors would echo the assessment of Daybreak's Tim Smith: "NIATx is no longer an experiment. It had a transformative effect on our agency. It's just the way we do business now."