Overcoming barriers

What is it?

Improvement necessitates change, which inevitably creates varying degrees of anxiety and resistance. To prepare for this, you need to generate enthusiasm among your colleagues and may have to seek to win over people who oppose the change.

The overcoming barriers tool helps you to consider personal perspectives of change and prepare responses to the issues that might arise. If people feel their concerns have been recognised and understood, they will be more supportive of the change or improvement in the long term.

When to use it

Use this tool when starting out on an improvement journey. When you first introduce proposals for change, try testing out the ideas with staff who are prepared to act as sceptics and as devil’s advocate. This can help prepare you for opposition in the future. For this to work effectively however, your staff need a safe forum in which to voice their concerns and opinions.

How to use it

1. Start by selecting a ‘safe’ group of staff who will be involved in the change. They need to be supporters who are able to stand back from the proposals and consider them from the sceptics’ point of view. Ask them to be a critical friend of the proposal. This gives them the security to explore all different angles and express their ideas honestly.

2. Ask the group to identify barriers and any potential objections to the change that could be raised. You may find brainstorming and bullet proofing useful strategies at this stage. Rank the points raised in order of seriousness, which you could do in a table like this:

Figure 1: Table showing objections to change in order of seriousness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If it did occur?</th>
<th>How likely is it to occur?</th>
<th>If it did occur?</th>
<th>How likely is it to occur?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minor objection</td>
<td>Unlikely</td>
<td>Major objection</td>
<td>Most serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Highly likely</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Least serious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Select the most serious objections and discuss them using the following questions:

- Why is this considered a barrier?
- What impact would it have on the change effort?
- What could the group do about it? What would be most effective?
- When should the group do this?
- Who should lead different areas of the project?

Also, try asking people for their instinctive reactions to the proposed change. Change is generally met with enthusiasm when people:

- propose the change or are involved in designing it
- feel their opinions are heard and that they can contribute to the new reality
- benefit from change or the organisation, patients and wider community benefit from the change
- dislike the existing status quo
- trust/respect/like the person or group proposing the change
- can see the big picture and how the change contributes to it
- are given support and time to adjust to the changes and aren’t expected to change too many things at the same time
- understand the reasons for change
- believe change is important and necessary.

Change is met with confrontation or resistance when people:

- are not involved in the change design and do not feel their opinions are considered
- do not see benefits for themselves, the NHS, the patients or the wider community arising from the change
- find the existing status quo comfortable
- do not trust/respect/like the person or group proposing the change
- cannot see the big picture and how change would contribute to it
- are not given support and time to adjust to the changes or are expected to change too many things at the same time
- do not understand the reasons for change
- cannot see clarity about the change aims and objectives
- believe other things need changing more urgently or that the time isn’t right for this particular change
- cannot see how to integrate the change into current practice.
What next?

Once you have identified potential barriers, use bullet proofing, brainstorming and other problem-solving tools to help you come up with ways of overcoming the barriers.

You may wish to revise the scope of your project and how the changes will be implemented. If you have identified groups that will need further consultation, enabling collaboration by working with resistance and active listening may be of use.

Additional resources
