

## STEP 1: SETTING YOUR AIM

Agreeing on the aim of improvement work is crucial. You will not improve without a clear and firm intention to do so.

An aim statement should be **SMART**: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime-bound.

Be clear in outlining:

- What you are trying to achieve?
- By how much?
- By when?

This will ensure everyone is working towards the same aim and expectation. A good aim statement can help to motivate people about your project as being something worthwhile, measurable and achievable.

**POOR AIM: "Improve cancer services to deliver timely care"**

**Doesn't** clearly state what the change will be, which service area or who is responsible. Is it for all types of cancers? The project aim must stipulate how much the service is going to be improved, when it is going to be completed and what is the impact of the improvement.

**GOOD AIM: "Achieve a 20% reduction in emergency admissions for heart failure patients by July 2013"**

Provides a clear a numerical target to aim for, but what is the 20% measured against? Is it 20% reduction from the previous year? Is it realistic? Could it be achieved?

### Tips for Setting Aims

**1. State the aim clearly.** Achieving agreement on the aim of a project is critical for maintaining progress. Teams make better progress when they are very specific about their aims. Make sure that the aim statement describes the system to be improved, and the patient population. In addition, ensure that the aim gives guidance on the approaches to improvement.

**2. Include numerical goals that require fundamental change to the system.** Teams are more successful when they have unambiguous, focused aims. Setting numerical goals clarifies the aim, helps to create tension for change, directs measurement, and focuses initial changes. For example, the aim "Reduce operating room time" is not as effective as "Reduce operating room time by 50% within 12 months." Including numerical goals not only clarifies the aim but also helps team members begin to think about what their measures of improvement will be, what initial changes they might make, and what level of support they will need.

**3. Set stretch goals.** A "stretch" goal is one to reach for within a certain time. Setting stretch goals such as "Reduce operating room time by 50% within 12 months" communicates immediately and clearly that maintaining the status quo is not an option. Effective leaders make it clear that the goal cannot be met by tweaking the existing system. Once this is clear, people begin to look for ways to overcome barriers and achieve the stretch goals.

**4. Avoid aim drift.** Once the aim has been set, the team needs to be careful not to back away from it deliberately or "drift" away from it unconsciously. The initial stretch goal "Reduce operating room time by 50% within 12 months" can slip almost imperceptibly to "Reduce operating room time by 40%" or "by 20%." To avoid drifting away from the aim, repeat the aim continually. Start each team meeting with an explicit statement of aim, for example, "Remember, we're here to reduce operating room time by 50% within 12 months," and then review progress quantitatively over time.

**5. Be prepared to refocus the aim.** Every team needs to recognize when to refocus its aim. If the team's overall aim is at a system level (for example, "Reduce adverse drug events in critical care by 30% within 12 months"), team members may find that focusing for a time on a smaller part of the system (for example, "Reduce adverse drug events for critical care patients on the cardiac service by 30% within 12 months") will help them achieve the desired system-level goal. Note: Don't confuse aim drift, or backing away from a stretch goal (which usually isn't a good tactic), with consciously deciding to work on a smaller part of the system (which often is a good tactic).