

# **Executive Review of Improvement Projects: A Primer for CEOs and other Senior Leaders**

**James Reinertsen  
Michael Pugh  
Tom Nolan**

## **Background**

It has been said that currency of leadership is *attention*. If that is true, then leaders who wish to transform their organizations should channel their attention to the key leverage points for the quality transformation, and use their chosen leverage points well.

Improvement projects are important processes in the overall transformation of institutions. Well-chosen projects, with high aims for improvement, capable project leadership and teamwork, and good organizational support, can raise the standard of care in the project area or department, promote spread throughout the organization, and demonstrate the values and behaviors that will drive the transformation. If a project produces real results—i.e. sustained improvement of a breadth and depth that makes both patients and caregivers notice—it sends a signal that will be heard throughout the organization that quality improvement is not just a sidebar activity. If, on the other hand, projects produce superficial results, or tepid results are over-praised, or those working in projects cannot connect them to overall organizational strategies, this also sends a signal—one that will hinder, rather than accelerate the transformation. For these reasons, projects are key leverage points—high visibility moments—in the long-term transformation process.

Executive review of projects can be a critical factor in whether the projects will help, or hurt, the transformation. The first step is for executives to make the decision to channel attention to project reviews, and to budget the time in their own schedules for this activity. The next step is to learn how to do a good project review—the principal focus of this brief practical guide. It's not enough to give projects your time. You must also know how to use that time well—so that your reviews help, rather than hurt.

## **Purpose of Senior Leader Project Review**

The purpose of reviews of projects by CEOs and other executives should be clear:

1. To learn whether the project is on track, or is likely to fail
2. If the project is not achieving the intended results, to understand why:
  - a. Lack of organizational will?
  - b. Absence of strong enough ideas for improvement?
  - c. Failure to execute changes?
3. To provide guidance, support, and stimulus to the project team on will, ideas, and execution
4. To decide whether the project should be stopped.

## Process of Review

Good process review doesn't happen by walking into the team meeting and asking, "how's it going?" Maximum impact for your time comes from some pre-meeting preparation, a well-executed meeting process, and a system for post-meeting communication. It might be helpful to think of these phases in the form of a checklist, to be completed for each project review that you conduct.

### Pre-meeting preparation

- ❑ Know the context for the project, and be prepared to remind the team why the project is important, and how it fits into the overall goals and system-level measures of the organization. Example: An organization goal is to reduce hospital mortality rates (HSMR). The project is aimed at improving inpatient flow. As CEO, you should be prepared to answer the question, "Why are we doing this project, and how does it relate to our strategic goals?"
- ❑ Read the project report prior to the meeting. A good general rule for reports is: "If even the CEO can understand the aims, measures, and results, it's a good report."
- ❑ Communicate with the project leader to establish a meeting agenda and expectations: no big presentations, review of aims, measures, results, prognosis, ideas for next cycles of improvement

### Meeting itself

- ❑ Start the review by clarifying the aim: "What, exactly, are you trying to accomplish in this project?" Look for aims set at the level of best practice, or raising the bar, rather than more conservative goals.
- ❑ Then ask about the measurements: "Please summarize for me the measures you're using to know whether you're moving towards your aim." Look for a few solid measures, well defined, with comparative data available.
- ❑ Within 3 to 5 minutes of the project review, you should move to reviewing the data. "So let's look at your results so far." Look for clear graphic displays (graphs should be clear, sample size identified, time series.) Spend considerable time on these results—enough to establish that you understand the numbers, but more important, that you really care about getting results.
- ❑ Share with the team two to three good elements of the project and provide encouragement. E.g. "Excellent use of stratification in breaking this project up into manageable chunks."... Or... "You've already completed 16 improvement cycles? That's almost one every 2 days. Wow!"
- ❑ Discuss trends and prognosis with the project team. "OK, given your progress to date, and the ideas you're planning to try, make a prediction: Are you going to achieve this project's aim?"
- ❑ If there is any uncertainty about the project's prognosis, try to determine whether the failure mode is primarily related to Will, Ideas, or Execution. Indicators of each of these failure modes include:
  - Will:
    - Resources necessary to the project's success are not made available

- A few loud nay Sayers are blocking implementation and spread of good ideas
  - Absence of any obvious connection between this project and key strategic goals
  - Lack of executive and board attention to this project
  - Line managers appear to be on the sidelines, not responsible for project success
  - Ideas:
    - The project team has not gone outside the organization, or outside health care, to find the best ideas
    - Few cycles of improvement have been attempted
    - “Big Ideas” appear to be absent—changes being tested are safe, incremental, not radical redesigns
    - The team can’t tell you who has the best results in the world on this topic
  - Execution:
    - Project setup, and project management appear to be weak
    - Preparation for spread is not part of the project from the inception
    - The project team can not articulate a coherent change leadership framework being used by the project
    - The project gets good results on pilots, but never seems to scale up
- If it appears that Will is the problem, this is often something that the CEO or other senior executive can make a major impact on. You can make resources available, deal with the few loud voices, channel attention to the importance of this project, make the connections to key strategies, and assign responsibility to line managers.
- If Ideas are the problem, ask questions that will stimulate the search for ideas.
- “What ideas do you have for further improvement?”
  - “Where are you looking for new ideas?” (Encourage them to look far and wide, including outside of health care)
  - “Who’s the very best in the world at this? How could we find out?”
  - Give explicit permission, and broad encouragement, to try small-scale tests of big ideas. “It sounds as if you have a number of good ideas already. How could you test one of those ideas, and have an answer by the end of the week?” Senior executives doing a good review have to be comfortable pushing and supporting innovation and small tests.
- If Execution is the problem, it is a good opportunity for you to teach good project management and change leadership skills to the project team, and to learn about the larger organization’s barriers to execution in its culture, information systems, human resource policies, and other areas.
- Finish the meeting by asking: “Where do you need help from me?” Projects often encounter significant barriers within the organization, and it’s important for the executive doing the review to understand how she can help the team reach its goals.

### Meeting follow-up

- Set a reminder to call or email the team leader in a week, and periodically thereafter, asking for the results of tests of change. By doing so, your “attention” to the team will extend over a much longer time period, reinforce the importance of the team’s work, and encourage many more cycles of improvement.
- Communicate to the team what you have done in response to their requests for help. This communication could be at the next project review that you do, but it might be timelier if it were simply an email or other communication to team members.

### **Common fears, and antidotes**

CEOs and other executives sometimes avoid doing project reviews because of fears such as:

1. “I don’t know much about clinical medicine,” (or whatever the content of the project is). The good news about the above template for doing a review is that you can do it, and do it well, without being a content expert. You need not fear embarrassment on this matter.
2. “I don’t know how to interpret run charts and control charts. What if I ask a stupid question?” There are only two answers to this fear: knowledge (learn the basics of QI so that you can ask meaningful questions about the results) and humility (don’t be afraid to show your ignorance, and to be taught by your team members.)
3. “I’m concerned that by doing these reviews I’m stepping into the area of responsibility of one of my direct reports.” This is a legitimate concern, if you were to assign yourself to do every project review. Obviously, you shouldn’t be doing your direct reports’ jobs for them, and you shouldn’t do every review. But wouldn’t it be a good idea to show them a model for how to do the reviews? And demonstrate what it is you want them to emphasize and encourage?