

## **Managing Change in a Healthcare Organization: Project or Operation?**

*By Maulik Baxi, MD, MPH, CPH, PMP*

### **Introduction**

Change management is a continuous and incremental process. It requires refinement and constant supervision to insure the desired change takes place at desired pace. Change management can lead to unintended or unforeseen consequences. A carefully tailored, specific and supervised change management process is essential to achieve strategic organizational objectives.

Managing change in a healthcare organization can require a complex set of interdependent activity. Multiple stakeholders, timelines, budgetary constraints and quality of care can make managing change process a very complicated undertaking. Healthcare leaders, which more often than not include bedside practitioners, can provide valuable insights into this process.

### **Change management as a Project**

The question of whether change management is a project or an operation in a healthcare organization requires some thought. A project is generally defined as 'a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or a result' (*A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide)*, 2013). A project has a definite beginning and end with clearly defined interim milestones and deliverables.

Once the need for a change is identified, the project manager has a clearly defined beginning and once the change is completely achieved, the project of implementing it can be considered complete. In this sense, the process of change management is indeed a temporary endeavor to move away from an established process or product which concludes when the replacement process becomes operational or product becomes available.

For example, changing the way patients take a drug from injectable to oral is a change management process. First the company who makes the drug comes up with a new way of taking the drug. Then they advertise it to the prescribing physicians, establish a supply chain to have them delivered to pharmacies, and advertise it to the patients how to take it. The change is complete when the oral formulation becomes available and patients start taking the drug. This leads to a positive change of increasing convenience, reducing cost, eliminating painful injections and possibly improving compliance. The objective is achieved and benefits delivered, marking completion of a project.

## **Change Management as Operation**

However in practice, the change management in a healthcare organization, which are seldom projectized organizations, works more like a continuous operation. As the healthcare project and program managers becomes aware of the need for a change because of various data coming in from its internal evaluations, stakeholder requirements or external requirements, a change process needs to be initiated.

An organization can have a change management board in a formal or informal way to formally initiate a change. This change management process can be within a project or can happen across several projects. The changes that affect multiple projects, are more resource intensive or have uncertain outcomes are more likely to be resisted by the affected stakeholders. The healthcare organization needs to be more effective in implementing these changes. The fact that many times the change process is visible due to the public nature of healthcare organizations, makes it that much harder to implement the change. By the same token, increased requirement for transparency can make making the required changes that much easier as well. It is a management paradox that needs to be carefully navigated by the healthcare project manager.

As the change process is implemented, the healthcare organization needs to identify and measure the interim processes and outcomes. A continuous feedback loop needs to be developed and utilized to insure the change management takes place as per the change management plan. Once a change is completed, the outcomes are measured to identify the fit with the change objectives and if needed the processes are changed further. In this sense, the organizational change management is an operation, which happens on an ongoing basis.

## **Conclusion**

Detailed discussion on various models of how change management process is undertaken in healthcare organization is beyond the scope of this manuscript. However by developing a basic understanding of project management concepts, which includes the concept of change management, healthcare leaders can improve the probability of a more seamless and successful strategic change.

## **Reference**

*A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide)*. (2013) (5th Ed.). Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute, Inc.

## About the Author



### **Maulik Baxi**

Ontario, Canada



**Dr. Maulik Baxi**, MD, MPH, CPH, PMP is a Research Program Manager at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, Canada. Dr. Baxi is Molecular Epidemiologist by training with professional interests that include public health, clinical research and chronic disease epidemiology. Dr. Baxi is Board Certified in Public Health and a certified Project Management Professional. He is alumnus of Medical College at The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in India and the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University in New York. Dr. Baxi can be contacted at [maulik.baxi@gmail.com](mailto:maulik.baxi@gmail.com).