Applying Quality Improvement Approaches to Human Resources for Health

Around the world, the scarcity of trained health workers undermines efforts to address skyrocketing HIV/AIDS infection rates as well as other infectious diseases, and provide basic health care to mothers and children. Over-loaded health workers and understaffed facilities are struggling to care for rising patient loads. Many of these health care providers lack motivation and a sense of control over their work which lowers their productivity and the quality of care their patients receive. Improving the capacity and engagement of health workers is essential for improving health care in USAID-assisted countries.

HCl’s Strategy to Engage and Retain Health Workers

The USAID Health Care Improvement (HCI) Project supports countries in applying quality improvement methods to strengthen processes and outcomes of health care. Quality improvement (QI) involves mobilizing provider teams to: 1) identify and overcome problems affecting care quality, 2) test interventions, and 3) spread successful changes through shared learning and collaboration among multiple teams. This process encourages creativity and shared decision-making, measures changes frequently to ensure improvement, and provides a platform for exponential sharing of lessons learned and adoption of best practices.

HCl’s health workforce strategy adapts this improvement approach to strengthen and improve human resource systems by engaging health care workers, their communities, supervisors, and decision-makers in developing, testing, and implementing practical and sustainable solutions. The project applies QI approaches to solve human resources problems faced by developing country health systems, especially at the facility and district levels. QI approaches are especially appropriate for strengthening human resources at the peripheral level, since experience shows that QI work empowers health workers to make changes to improve care and increases health workers’ sense of professionalism and job satisfaction.

HCl uses employee engagement to measure and improve health worker performance. Engaged employees – according to research and practice in many private sector organizations – work harder, produce more and stay longer in their jobs. Engaging employees requires that employees value their organization and their jobs, believe they can succeed, feel valued, and perceive they have a substantial role to play in the organization and in shaping their futures.

As teamwork, collaboration, and empowerment are key elements in engagement, using working teams to empower health workers to solve problems, providing recognition and support for accomplishments, and empowering workers with approaches such as self-assessment, peer coaching, and peer support for flexible work times, can have dramatic effects on the engagement and productivity of workers. Teams can provide a shared mission, clarity in roles and responsibilities, feedback on performance, reward and recognition, and allow individuals to influence the work.

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Increasing health worker engagement also requires consistent performance management support. Performance management ensures that workers have achievable workloads and clear expectations. Health workers need feedback on performance, fair evaluations, recognition and rewards for performing well, and career development opportunities. Although this process is ideally delivered by managers through consistent supervision, elements can be supplemented through quality improvement teams, worker-focused initiatives, and peer groups. Teams can address gaps such as clarifying job expectations by analyzing work processes and rationalizing provider skills with required jobs and tasks. Using the improvement collaborative approach, multiple teams can work on common problem areas, share successful change strategies, and facilitate spreading successful practices to other sites.

The figure below depicts the relationships between performance management, quality improvement, employee engagement, and the desired outcomes of increased retention, increased productivity, and improved quality of care. By addressing drivers of employee engagement and productivity, HCI is meeting country-specific needs while expanding the evidence base for applying QI approaches to human resources management.

Current HCI Activities in Workforce Development

- **Niger** – HCI is working with the Ministry of Health and Regional Health Directorate to implement a Human Resources Collaborative in the Tahoua Region to improve health worker engagement, productivity, and retention. Improvement activities focus on strengthening performance management through QI teams and increasing employee engagement.

HCI measured the engagement of health workers with an instrument that adapted current best practices in Employee Engagement to the Nigerien context. All health workers, including non-literate ones, completed a confidential 26-item questionnaire with a 5-point agreement scale. Teams of health workers are using the results of the engagement questionnaire, along with other baseline results, to solve some of the issues that are most serious to health workers, such as rewards, career advancement, and safety on the job. Employees will complete the same questionnaire on a quarterly basis, and QI teams and facility, district and regional managers will meet regularly with groups of employees to continue analyzing and solving problems that mean the most to them.

- **Uganda** – The Ministry of Health and HCI are applying the improvement collaborative approach to engage district management teams in coaching facility-based quality improvement teams as a long-term strategy to improve performance management and institutionalize a continuous quality improvement function at the district level.

- **Benin** – Together with the PISAF Project, HCI is conducting research to evaluate the effectiveness of a task-shifting intervention that uses job aids to enable lower cadre health workers to achieve proficient performance of maternal and newborn care tasks.

- **Namibia** – HCI is supporting the Ministry of Health and Social Services to expand its Workplace Program to provide training for health care providers on abstinence-be faithful-contraception, de-stigmatization of HIV, stress management, and bereavement.

- **Global** – In partnership with USAID, HCI has developed a rapid assessment tool to measure community health worker programs, as part of USAID’s strategy to address the human resources crisis for maternal and child health services. Field testing of the tool begins in June 2009 in Nepal. HCI is also evaluating HIV/AIDS training programs for health workers in selected USAID-assisted countries.