



Continuous Improvement

THE ASK:

Continuous improvement aims to identify how well systems are working and to understand the quality of care and services being delivered. It is important that the governing body and executives set a culture of continuous improvement across the entire organisation by taking an approach of improving performance in their decision making and strategic direction, which leads to better outcomes for consumers.

Covered in this Topic Guide

- What is continuous improvement?
- Provider obligations for continuous improvement
- The role of the governing body and executives in setting a culture of continuous improvement
- The Plan-Do-Check-Act model
- Change management and succession planning

Where are we now?



Compliance and improvement will follow the right culture...the governing body needs to drive the governance down to the staff member delivering care to change [the approach] to continuous improvement over punitive responses.

GOVERNING BODY MEMBER

Key concepts

- **Continuous improvement** refers to a systematic, ongoing effort to raise a provider's performance in achieving outcomes for consumers.
- A **plan for continuous improvement** sets out a provider's identified areas for improvement and how the provider will measure actions to address those improvements.
- **Change management** refers to a structured, systematic approach to implementing changes that supports staff and stakeholder engagement within the organisation.
- **Succession planning** refers to the process of replacing, developing or refreshing leadership roles in order to continue meeting the needs and challenges of the organisation.

Continuous improvement in aged care

Continuous improvement is a critical process in the aged care sector that informs the approach to both clinical governance and corporate governance. Ultimately, a culture of continuous improvement and learning leads to better outcomes for consumers and the delivery of consistent, safe, high quality and consumer-centred care. This is reflected in the Aged Care Rules and Principles (set out under the Aged Care Act 1997), which require providers have continuous improvement systems and processes that assess, monitor and improve the quality of care and services. Specifically:

- Standard 8 Organisational Governance, Requirement(3)(c) of the Aged Care Quality Standards requires that providers demonstrate governance systems relating to continuous improvement.
- Section 62 of the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission Rules 2018 requires that providers can produce to the Commission a written plan for continuous improvement.

Story from the sector



Engaging with staff and consumers directly leads to more effective improvement activities

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Continuous improvement is a results-focused activity that is demonstrated through outputs and outcomes.
- Data can help governing bodies understand systemic issues and root causes.

In its February meeting, the Acme Community Services governing body received its regular Incident Dashboard, which noted there had been 'an increase in the number of incidents involving skin tears and falls'. The CEO explained that a shortage of lifting equipment had led to delays in getting residents out of bed in the morning. As a result, more consumers were trying to get *themselves* out of bed. The governing body identified this situation as an opportunity for improvement and approved the purchase of additional lifting equipment.

At the next meeting, the Incident Dashboard included no specific note as to skin tears and falls. One governing body member was curious about the data and noticed that while the incident number within the dashboard was not showing as 'red' (to indicate an increase), it was not showing as 'green' either (to indicate a decrease as expected). The CEO agreed to look into this further and provide the governing body with an update after the meeting.

Following the CEO's engagement with staff, it was found that uptake of the new equipment had actually been very low as staff had not been trained in how to use the equipment and were not confident to use it without being trained properly. Training sessions were quickly rolled out across the workforce, and this led to a noticeable decrease in the number of skin tears and falls, which was proudly reported to the next governing body meeting. The governing body also noted a slight overall decrease in complaints from family members (relating to injuries) and a slight overall increase in staff satisfaction.

Tips for continuous improvement

Older Australians at the Centre

- Continuous improvement processes should support organisations to be more responsive to consumer needs.
- Continuous improvement should engage consumers, staff and other stakeholders to improve performance and find better ways of doing things.

Obligations and Accountabilities

- Understand the obligation to produce a plan for continuous improvement to the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission when required.
- Understand how a continuous improvement approach is demonstrated in other quality indicators.

Knowledge, Skills and Experience

- Identify what model of continuous improvement is the most effective for the provider and consumers and embed the elements of that model into the change management processes.
- Be aware of what information and data are being collected that can be used to identify issues or gaps and drive continuous improvement activities.

Leadership and Culture

- Continuous improvement is an approach and mindset that is driven by a culture of viewing identified issues or gaps as opportunities to develop and improve service delivery and consumer outcomes.

Reflecting on your practice



Think...

Below are the top things you need to be **thinking** about:

- How are continuous improvement activities being selected across the organisation? How do these align with the organisation's strategic objectives?
- What evidence is there of the outcomes and impacts continuous improvement has on services and consumer outcomes?
- Are continuous improvement activities being undertaken to address areas that consumers and their families think are important?
- How are consumers being involved in the identification, implementation and evaluation of continuous improvement activities?
- What are the emerging innovations and trends in the delivery of care and services, and how are these feeding into our continuous improvement efforts?



Ask and say...

Below are the top questions you need to be **asking**:

- What information does the governing body use to identify issues or gaps and drive continuous improvement activities?
- What data and assurance are the governing body getting about clinical and quality indicators, and how is this being used to drive continuous improvement?
- How do the current continuous improvement processes feed into structural improvements in how we deliver quality care to consumers?
- Does the governing body take a continuous improvement approach to its own succession planning processes?
- Are there change processes in place to support identified improvement activities to be implemented?



Do...

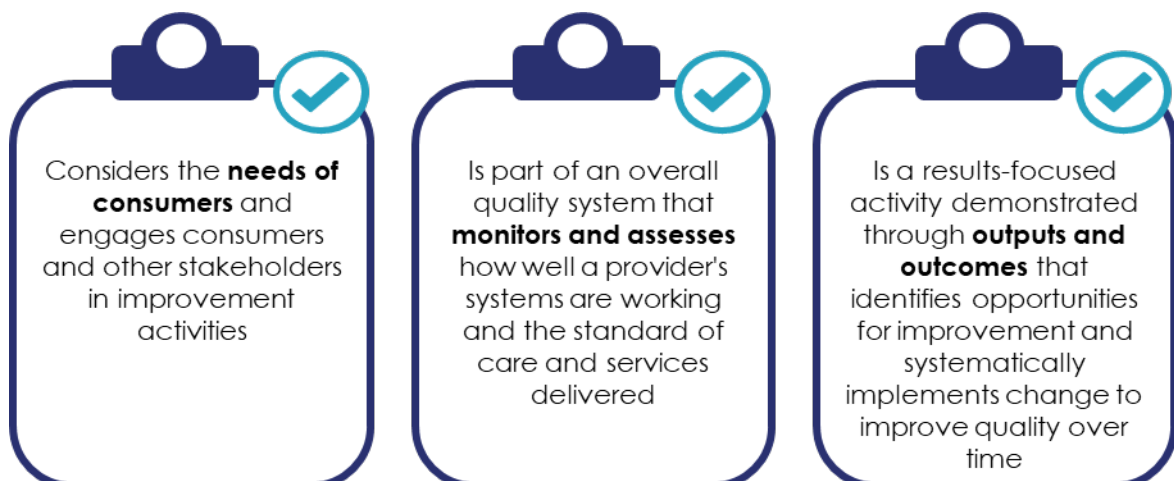
These are the top **actions and behaviours** of leaders:

- Implement a continuous improvement approach such as the Plan-Do-Check-Act tool to identify quality issues and test continuous improvement activities.
- Ensure that everyone understands their role in ensuring the quality of service delivery and provide clear avenues to develop continuous improvement activities.
- Track the impact that continuous improvement activities are having on care and services.
- Continue to critically assess and evaluate performance to drive improvement at all levels of the provider.
- Embed a culture of continuous improvement, teamwork and stewardship.

What is continuous improvement?

Continuous improvement is a systematic, coordinated and ongoing effort to improve the quality of care, services and outcomes for consumers. A continuous approach requires a commitment to improving effectiveness, flexibility and an ongoing learning mindset that seeks out opportunities for positive change through planned steps. Continuous improvement activities can range from minor incremental improvements to processes to broader strategic initiatives and objectives. Regardless of the size of the activities, a key element of continuous improvement is regular monitoring and evaluation of progress that is focused on consumer outcomes and linked to a provider's strategic objectives.

The continuous improvement process in the delivery of aged care services:



Why is continuous improvement important?

Continuous improvement works to identify how well systems are working and to understand the quality of care and services being delivered. This helps providers identify where quality and safety are at risk or where there are opportunities to strengthen the quality of services. Based on an understanding of where improvements can be made, continuous improvement then focuses on improving the delivery of safe, high quality and consumer-centred care.

When undertaken effectively, continuous improvement:

- identifies issues or gaps in processes and improves the delivery of care and services
- supports the identification of quality issues early
- supports organisations to be more responsive to the changing needs of consumers
- improves outcomes for consumers
- improves stakeholder input and ownership and increases collaboration amongst staff at all levels
- enhances professional development
- enhances systems to monitor and track change
- creates long-term and sustainable improvement across organisations.

Provider obligations for continuous improvement

Plans for continuous improvement

A written plan for continuous improvement is a living, iterative document that sets out a provider's identified areas for improvement and how the provider will measure actions to address those areas of improvement.

Under section 62 of the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission Rules 2018, providers have an obligation to:

- have a written plan for continuous improvement in the quality of care and services they provide
- ensure the written plan for continuous improvement sets out if there are any service improvements needed to ensure the Aged Care Quality Standards are complied with and how the provider will make those improvements
- provide the Commissioner with a copy of the plan for continuous improvement and revise this plan if requested by the Commissioner.



A provider's continuous improvement plan must set out how the provider will:

- assess the quality of care and services provided against the Aged Care Quality Standards
- monitor and improve the quality of care and services against the Aged Care Quality Standards.

Demonstrating compliance in continuous improvement

Providers can undertake a self-assessment of their performance against the Aged Care Quality Standards. Self-assessment is an important part of the continuous improvement cycle for aged care providers as it provides an opportunity to evaluate performance, assess the effectiveness of any past improvements, and support processes for ongoing quality improvement. Completing a self-assessment can be a useful tool to demonstrate evidence that improvement activities have taken place and for communicating a provider's improvement activity.


The requirements with respect to continuous improvement, however, go beyond a single written document or plan. All providers must comply with the Aged Care Quality Standards, which require providers to demonstrate continuous improvement practices across a range of areas, including:

- **Feedback and complaints** – Use input and feedback from consumers, carers, the workforce and other stakeholders to inform continuous improvements for consumers and the organisation (Standard 6).
- **Organisational governance** – Have an effective organisation-wide governance system for continuous improvement (Standard 8).
- **Consumer engagement** – Engage consumers in the development, delivery and evaluation of care and services, and support consumers in this engagement (Standard 1 and Standard 2).
- **Incident management** – Collect data relating to incidents to continuously improve the management and prevention of incidents, including to enable the provider to:
 - identify and address systemic issues in the quality of care provided and provide feedback and training to the workforce about managing and preventing incidents
 - assess the effectiveness of the management and prevention of incidents and implement any actions required to improve this (Standard 3)
 - comply with reporting requirements under the Serious Incident Response Scheme.

Drivers of continuous improvement

To be effective, continuous improvement must be central to a provider’s focus, understood at all levels, and accepted and put into practice by all management and staff. The governing body should receive the right information in order to assess the provider’s performance and drive strategies for continuous improvement.

Information and data are key drivers to facilitate continuous improvement. Some of these information sources can include:



<p>Incident data – Incident data, such as trends in incidents, or a specific, reportable incident, can assist with identifying gaps in processes.</p>	<p>Complaints and feedback – Complaints and feedback from consumers, consumer representatives and staff can provide important information about areas for improvement.</p>
<p>Audits or evaluations – Results from audits or evaluations (including those undertaken by the Commission) help to determine compliance with good practice and compliant care.</p>	<p>Education and training – Education and training to explore research and trends can facilitate innovation that helps to find better ways of doing things and make improvements in care processes.</p>
<p>Benchmarking and collaboration – Considering learnings from other organisations or benchmarking against published performance reports or literature from sector resources can provide opportunities for collaboration and shared learning to drive improvements across the sector.</p>	<p>Self-assessment – Results from self-assessment activities undertaken in preparation for accreditation or quality review or assessment against internal metrics and strategic objectives can be a useful source of identifying gaps and improvements outside of measurements against the Aged Care Quality Standards.</p>

Role of the governing body

Governing bodies of aged care providers are responsible for setting the strategic objectives of providers to ensure the provider can meet consumer needs and effectively respond to changes in the aged care environment. It’s important to keep track of where efforts are being focused and the outcomes that are being achieved to ensure that improvement efforts are coordinated and set up for success.

It is important that the governing body also evaluate its own performance with a view to continuously improving. Governing bodies can consider undertaking regular self-evaluation to identify areas where they can improve and further strengthen processes, decision making and culture. The assessment may be undertaken using an anonymous survey and can also involve interviews with an external provider.

The governing body and executives, therefore, play a vital role in driving continuous improvement. Governing body members that take a continuous improvement approach and mindset are better placed to be able to drive positive change for the provider and for the aged care sector more broadly. Importantly, continuous improvement is a concept that should be observed at every level of the organisation, from the development of an individual consumer’s care plan to the performance and assessment of the functions of the governing body.

Supporting a culture of continuous improvement

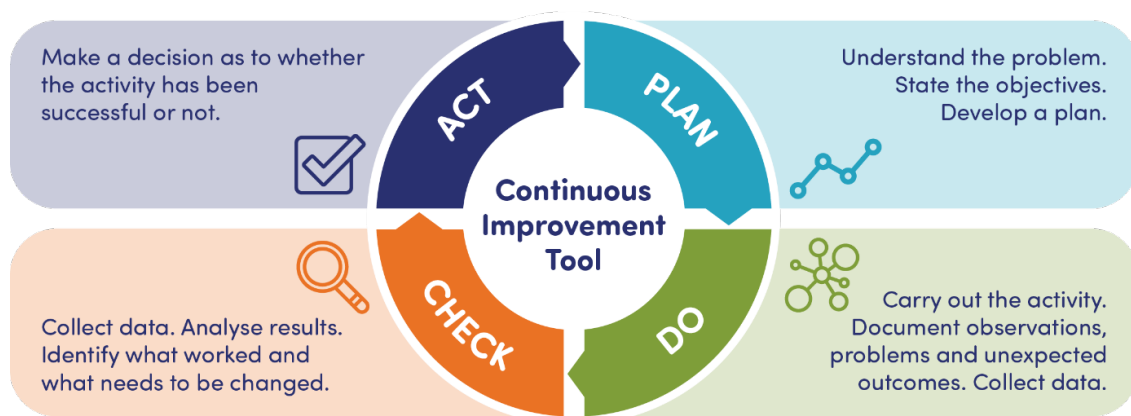
The culture of a governing body and the provider as a whole is as important as its procedures and systems. Continuous improvement is more than a single document, plan or compliance requirement. Rather, it is an approach and mindset that drives an environment of positive change. Embedding an environment of continuous improvement that focuses on teamwork, improving performance and being open and ready for change is a key role of the governing body.

A high-performing culture is underpinned by the promotion of behaviours that align with the values of the provider, which includes open communication about mistakes or incidents so that the provider can learn and continue to improve. Leaders who set a tone from the top by demonstrating expected behaviours are better placed to embed a culture of curiosity, innovation and a learning mindset to view any issues/gaps in processes as opportunities for improvement.

The Plan-Do-Check-Act model for continuous improvement

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to continuous improvement, and there is a range of different approaches to continuous improvement that can be used to reflect the nature, size and structure of the provider. One option is the Plan-Do-Check-Act model that encompasses 4 key elements to help providers drive continuous improvement, including in areas where there has been a strategic commitment to quality improvement.

The Plan-Do-Check-Act tool can be applied at a high level to continuously drive improvements in the performance of the provider. It can also be used on a smaller scale to allow providers to identify specific quality performance issues and trial an improvement activity on a small scale to understand if the improvement activity is effective before implementing it across the entire system.



Plan

This is an important first step in quality improvement. At a high level, this can be the strategic plan and objectives of the provider, or it can be a plan to improve a specific service offering or process. Key elements to the plan include the following:

- Gather information to understand the current situation and identify what is causing the quality issue. This includes reviewing and analysing quality indicator data and may also include collecting additional data.
- Establish realistic goals for the quality improvement activity. Goals should be reasonable, unambiguous, measurable and have a set timeframe to be achieved.
- Make a plan for how the quality improvement activity will be put into practice. This process should be collaborative and include different levels of staff, consumers and any other relevant stakeholders. The plan should be detailed, define who is affected by the activity, and outline the tasks required and who is required to deliver them.

Do

This step focuses on actioning and delivering the quality improvement activities in the improvement plan. The implementation of the plan may require the governing body to do the following:

- Allocate resources to deliver the quality improvement activity.
- Test the activity at a small scale and adjust as needed.
- Inform stakeholders as required.
- Document observations, including any decisions made while delivering the activity and if any changes are made to the plan.
- Collect data based on the measures agreed upon in the planning phase.

Check

This is the review step that requires an evaluation of whether the improvement activities have been effective in addressing the identified issue or gap. This includes an assessment of qualitative and quantitative information.

Qualitative information involves asking questions to understand what did and did not work well and how further improvement can occur. Quantitative information involves collecting data to measure outcomes from a quality improvement activity. A validated quality improvement tool is a helpful way to collect this data. Once information and data have been collected, the results should be analysed and communicated to understand if any changes to the improvement activities need to be made.

Act

This involves deciding if a quality improvement activity has been successful in achieving the intended outcome.

- If the activity is successful, the new activity or processes should be implemented at a larger scale. This includes training and educating staff, updating policies and procedures, and informing stakeholders.
- If the activity is not successful, it's important to identify why this might be and what can be done differently. The Plan-Do-Check-Act tool should be used again, but this time with a different quality improvement approach.

An integral part of the Plan-Do-Check-Act model is that it is a cycle, meaning it requires ongoing evaluation and assessment of the improvement activities being undertaken that takes into consideration feedback and engagement from consumers, staff and other stakeholders. It is important that the governing body and executives have ways to measure and evaluate which actions are effective in improving the delivery of safe and high quality care and services.

Change management

By nature, effective continuous improvement processes and culture should lead to changes being made within the provider. Governing bodies that consider change management processes are often more effective in implementing improvement and achieving meaningful and sustainable change. Change management requires the provider's leaders to set a structured, systematic approach to implementing changes that supports a culture of preparedness and willingness for growth within the organisation. Effective change management can play a critical role in connecting the policies and procedures with the staff and consumers that are either impacted by the change or are required to effect the change. It is important that the governing body not only plans for change and improvement but also considers how those changes will be implemented and the impacts that they may have on staff morale and organisational culture. This includes:

- having clear roles and responsibilities for those involved in the change
- providing appropriate support to those affected by any changes
- strategies to communicate the changes effectively
- considering any potential unintended consequences
- considering the budget or financial requirements to implement the change
- considering what training or education may be required to implement the change.

Succession Planning

Succession planning plays an important role in continuous improvement as both processes ultimately seek to ensure the sustainability and ongoing success of a provider. Succession planning refers to the process of replacing, developing or refreshing leadership roles in order to continue meeting the needs and challenges of the organisation. Succession planning requires governing bodies to strategically plan for the provider's future needs to ensure that the people, skills mix and experience of the governing body support those needs.

It is important that a governing body takes a continuous improvement approach to its own succession planning beyond the strict replacement of governing body members. The approach should encourage the governing body to critically consider any skills and knowledge gaps that should be recruited for or require upskilling. This will enable the provider to meet the changing needs of consumers and position the provider well to respond to any regulatory or environmental changes.

Useful tools

- Tool - [Governing Body Self-Evaluation](#)

Useful references and links

[Aged Care Act 1997](#)

[Quality of Care Principles 2014](#)

[Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission Rules 2018](#)

[Aged Care Quality Standards | Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission](#)