

Lessons Learned About Quality Management During the Pandemic



As COVID-19 emerged in 2020, healthcare leaders, providers and staff quickly pivoted and put their full focus towards addressing the pandemic. Run-the-business efforts were minimized, so that the world could respond to a single clinical condition. Our ability to react and respond was extraordinary, and our resolve and endurance have proved heroic.

As part of the effort to address COVID-19, healthcare leaders quickly looked to healthcare quality professionals (HQPs) to step in and provide structure, order, measurement and an outcomes-based focus to the pandemic and the disruption it caused. HQPs stepped-up to do what they do best: bring an improvement mindset and improvement skills to any situation or circumstance. Healthcare leaders were able to leverage their quality

workforce to stand-up crisis command centers, activate telemedicine programs, develop safety protocols for the healthcare workforce and patients, and more.

With the intense focus on the COVID response, in many cases routine matters of quality and safety were deprioritized and as a result, we lost ground, turning back the clock on nearly five years of progress to improve on quality and safety metrics. Recent data shows significant year-over-year increases from 2019 to 2020 in hospital-acquired infections including CLABSI, CAUTI, VAE and MRSA bacteremia.¹

While healthcare stakeholders rightly now rush to turnaround these and other staggering setbacks, there are underlying takeaways that should not be lost on us:

Routine efforts to advance quality initiatives are highly effective, and when we stop or deprioritize those initiatives, health outcomes suffer

Any healthcare leader who has ever questioned the value of routine quality and safety work should take this as the signal that this work matters. And when it is deprioritized, even for a good reason, ground is lost. Constant focus is critical to maintain and sustain progress, and in fact, more effort on improving foundational quality and safety outcomes could help close long-standing gaps in quality and safety.

Reinstating, sustaining and advancing quality and safety initiatives is the path toward progress in healthcare

A “new normal” in healthcare appreciates that we must be dependent on sustainable systems, process and structure to ensure continuity in the face of known and unknown challenges. Performance and process improvement — and quality management — must be hard-wired into the work, so that when a crisis occurs, the focus is not shifted away from quality and safety. When quality and safety become the work, we will have achieved a sustainable model.

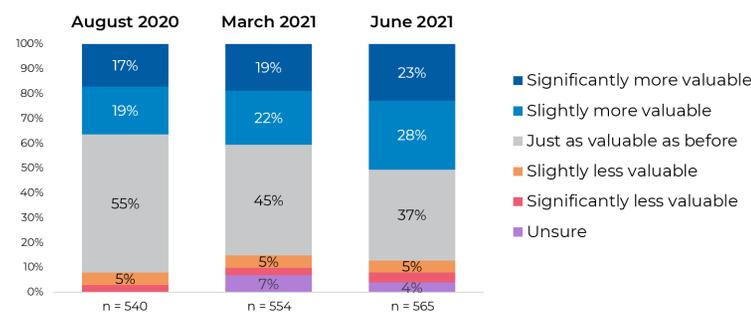
And, deploying quality professionals to solve many of the biggest challenges that healthcare leaders face will result in the biggest impact to advance healthcare leaders' priorities.

Healthcare quality leaders and professionals are uniquely qualified to solve problems. Whether leading, or sustaining run-the-business quality and safety initiatives or leading in a crisis, these leaders have the tools and competencies to bring order and deliver results.

Background

At multiple points during the pandemic, the National Association for Healthcare Quality (NAHQ) asked its community of healthcare quality professionals to share their experiences and feelings about their work. Data shows that HQPs felt increasingly more valued by their organizations as the pandemic progressed, and **in June 2021, 51% of respondents felt more valuable at work.**

“Do you believe that your role as a healthcare quality professional is perceived by your organization to be more valuable or less valuable now compared to a year ago?”



In fall 2021, NAHQ conducted a study to understand how performance and process improvement (PPI) tools, methods, approaches, and mindsets were utilized by healthcare quality professionals during the response to COVID-19. Healthcare quality professionals clearly recognized the value of PPI methods and the expertise needed to effectively implement them to manage rapid change during the crisis, with **71% saying the role of improvement methods increased in their organization's work during the pandemic.**

Performance and process improvement is a central component of healthcare quality. As one of the eight domains included in NAHQ's twice-validated Healthcare Quality Competency Framework, PPI involves using

project management and change management techniques to support quality initiatives, improve performance and achieve organizational goals. Examples of PPI methods include developing SMART goals, utilizing Plan Do Study Act (PSDA) models, and conducting stakeholder analysis to glean insights and perform small tests of change.

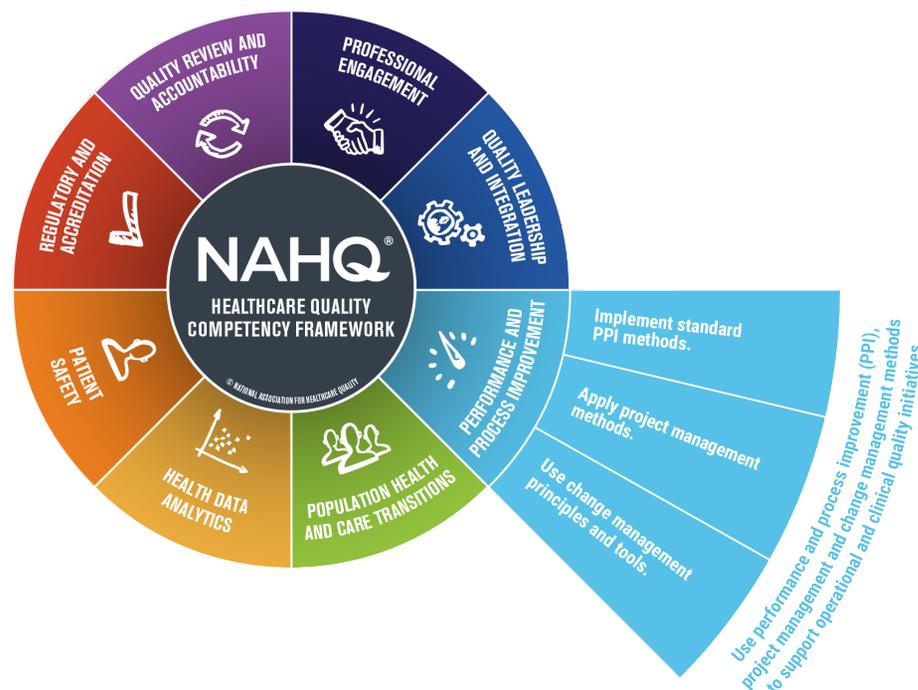
What did we learn?

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that PPI methods played a significant role in crisis management efforts during the response to COVID-19. Eighty-nine percent agreed that their teams have applied a systematic approach to improvement over the course of the pandemic. PPI tools were primarily utilized to measure what was happening, rapidly review and improve processes and practice, decide where to focus efforts and enable teams to work effectively together.

When asked to identify which enabling factors provided the most benefit to PPI work during the pandemic, respondents cited:

- Inclusive and compassionate leadership (76%)
- Clarity about organizational priorities (74%)
- Well-established PPI skills and approaches at their organizations prior to the pandemic (68%)

When asked about the biggest challenges to further embedding PPI tools into healthcare’s continuing response to COVID-19 and in preparation for future pandemics, respondents mentioned difficulties engaging staff in PPI projects, fighting to maintaining progress on quality initiatives unrelated to the pandemic,



lacking sufficient time and resources to formally implement PPI tools, and struggling to keep up with rapid changes in the environment.

Looking toward the future, the top issues that were identified as priorities for the healthcare quality profession to focus on moving forward include:

- Embedding systematic approaches to PPI within healthcare organizations
- Working in a more integrated way across teams
- Measuring and addressing the social determinants of health
- Improving staff well-being

Implications

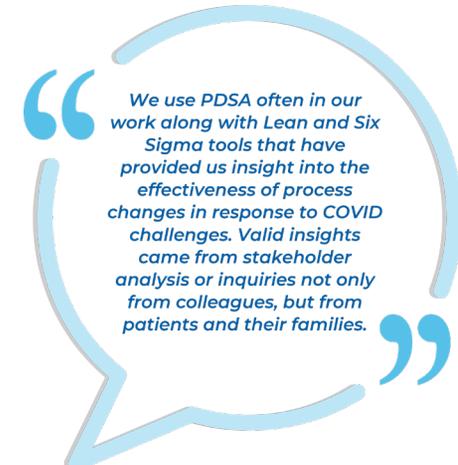
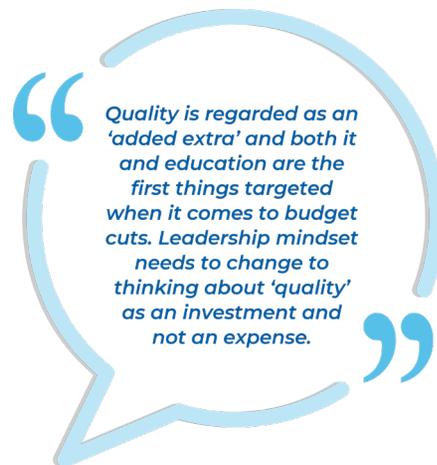
NAHQ's research demonstrates that when conditions demand the need for rapid cycle improvement, facilitating teamwork and managing the human aspects of crisis and change, healthcare quality professionals are uniquely equipped to lead.

Quality professionals are problem seekers, solution finders and experts at improving systems and processes. They stepped up to the challenge of the pandemic and will help chart the course to a “new normal” in which quality drives healthcare. Success in this new normal will require an increased focus on system sustainability as central to healthcare delivery. Leaders must work to unleash the human potential within the healthcare workforce and achieve a level of system sustainability that better prepares their organizations to face challenges ahead.

Further ingraining quality competencies and skills in healthcare organizations will be a critical step in the journey to transform healthcare. More professionals need more skills to deliver more value to their employers. Performance and process improvement skills, along with the seven other defined competency domains that NAHQ created and validated twice in the market, provide the roadmap to advance the healthcare workforce in pursuit of this goal.

The healthcare workforce is fatigued by the pandemic, but now is not the time to rely on the reflex that tells us to ask less of them, or to pull back from efforts that unite and leverage human potential. Organizations like Roper St. Francis Healthcare in South Carolina are experiencing commitment from the team and leadership is exemplary. Dr. Jeff DiLisi, CEO, has prioritized workforce engagement and development as one of three key drivers for success in their 2030 Strategic Plan. Leaders like Dr. DiLisi know the best resource they have to deliver quality and safety is their workforce, and they are doing “more,” not “less,” to engage with their team as they build towards the next normal.

Quotes from NAHQ study participants:





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Acknowledgements

This study is derived from prior research conducted by the Q Community, a professional membership organization for healthcare professionals doing improvement work in the United Kingdom and Ireland, sponsored by The Health Foundation². The authors of the Q Community study provided the survey questionnaire to the National Association for Healthcare Quality (NAHQ) and granted permission for NAHQ to use and adapt the questions as needed to suit an audience of healthcare quality professionals based in the United States. Participants of NAHQ's study were asked to identify the various ways in which their teams and organizations applied PPI tools during the COVID-19 pandemic response. The survey included 27 questions related to PPI work during the pandemic as well as questions related to respondents' professional roles and responsibilities. Data was collected anonymously in September 2021 from 234 NAHQ members and subscribers based in the United States. The protocol used for this research was reviewed by an Institutional Review Board and determined to meet the requirements for exempt Human Subjects Research. We thank Stephanie Mercado, CAE CPHQ and Lucie Pesch, MUSA for their contributions to this whitepaper.

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About NAHQ

The National Association for Healthcare Quality® (NAHQ) is the only organization dedicated to healthcare quality professionals, defining the standard of excellence for the profession, and equipping professionals and organizations across the continuum of healthcare to meet these standards. NAHQ believes that to reduce variability in healthcare delivery, we must first reduce variability in healthcare quality competencies, so we focus our efforts on healthcare quality competencies and workforce development. NAHQ published the first and only Healthcare Quality Competency Framework and validated it twice in the market. We offer the only accredited certification in healthcare quality, the Certified Professional in Healthcare Quality® (CPHQ), extensive educational programming, networking opportunities and career resources to help healthcare quality professionals enhance their competencies and their value. Learn more at **NAHQ.org**.