



PROMISING PRACTICE IN //BEST START

November 2021

How to facilitate quality improvement

Participation in early years services supports children's healthy growth, development and wellbeing. Best Start partnerships use a quality improvement (QI) approach to increase participation in universal early years services.

This involves bringing small groups of practitioners and/or managers – known as 'improvement teams' – together on a regular basis to explore the root causes of poor participation, identify possible solutions and then test these through rapid cycles (known as Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles). As part of the initiative's network-wide learning and coaching programs led by the Centre for Community Child Health, Best Start facilitators have come together on multiple occasions between August 2020 and June 2021 to reflect on their practice.

This document describes what facilitators are learning about facilitating QI in a community context with a wide range of stakeholders and organisations. It also contains reflections from two Best Start facilitators who have been engaged in the QI coaching program since 2017. Insights gained have informed a process for supporting facilitators to apply the learnings presented to continuously improve and extend their facilitation of QI.





Becoming an effective QI facilitator

Becoming an effective facilitator of QI is multidimensional. The Best Start learning sessions identified six domains of practice for becoming a more effective QI facilitator: Shifting your mindset; Developing technical knowledge and skills; Creating buy-in; Deepening relationships; Building the capacity of others; and Practising professional self-care (see Figure 1).

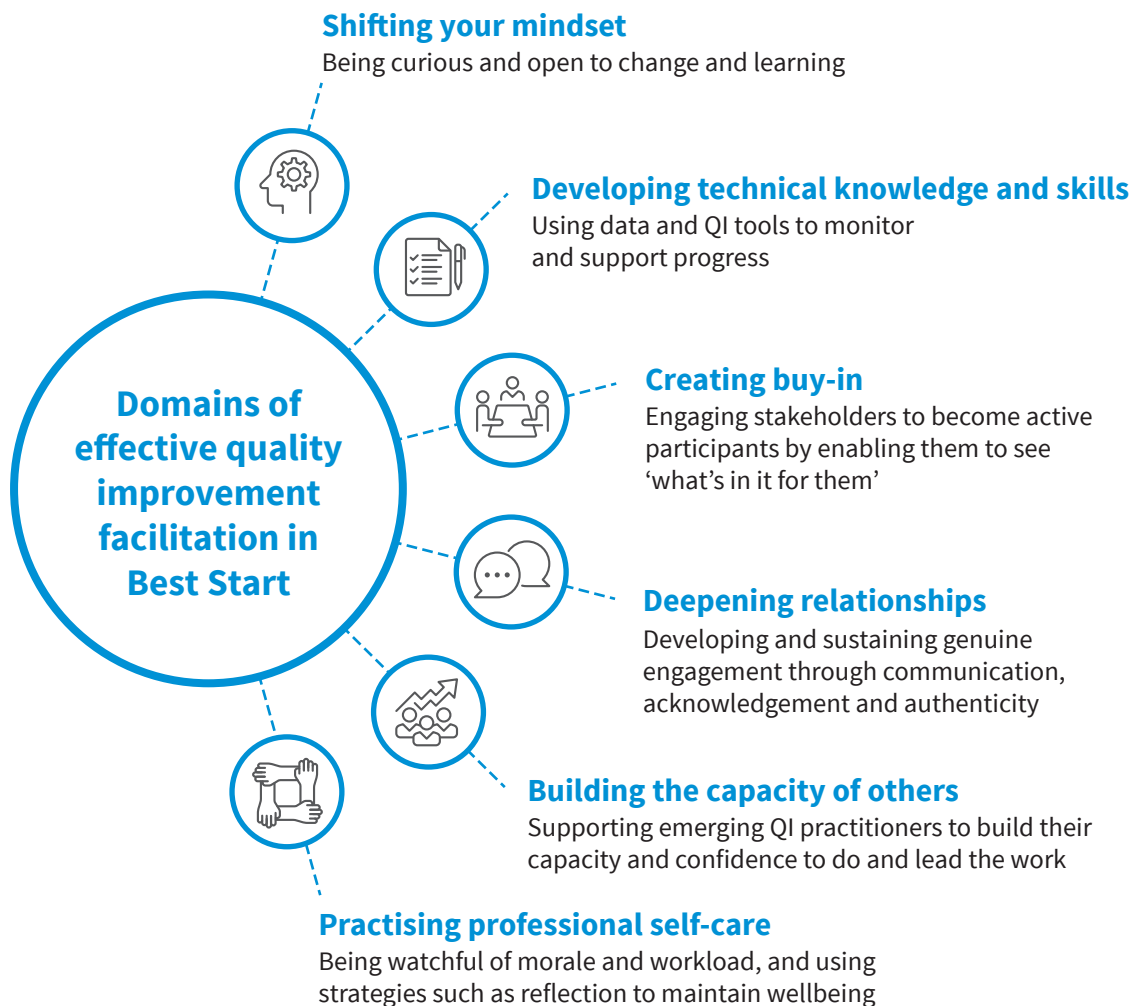


Figure 1: Domains of effective quality improvement facilitation in Best Start

1. Shifting your mindset



Facilitators identified that shifting their mindset around a few key ideas was an important aspect of becoming an effective QI facilitator. These included:

- being curious, **open to change** and exploring new ideas (instead of assuming that you already understand an issue and the likely solutions)



- seeing bumps in the road as **opportunities for learning** and not expecting things to always go according to plan (instead of labelling things as a ‘failure’ when they don’t work out as intended)
- understanding that **improvement happens incrementally** and therefore taking small steps, setting short-term goals and accepting that that wider systems change will take time.

2. Developing technical knowledge and skills



Facilitators stated that knowing how to effectively use data, QI tools and the Collaborate online portal was pivotal to their role. Specific skills included:

- **developing driver diagrams** for stretch goals that tease out the root causes of an issue and allow improvement teams to focus on making progress on one cause at a time
- **creating run charts** to monitor progress on a monthly basis and sharing these on the portal with partners
- **teaching partners how to use the portal** to report their PDSA cycles.

3. Creating buy-in



Facilitators recognised that being an effective QI facilitator involves engaging managers and practitioners across all kinds of organisations to become active participants. Facilitators identified the following approaches as effective for creating buy-in.

- Focusing on **building a solid understanding of QI** with the partnership and improvement teams.
- Making the case as to **why this work is so important** to partners; sharing evidence around the importance of the First 1000 days can be helpful in supporting this process.
- Helping partners **understand ‘what’s in it for them’** by promoting how Best Start can support their work and can help them deliver their organisational priorities.

4. Deepening relationships



Facilitators recognised that beyond initially engaging people, being able to deepen and maintain genuine relationships was a key factor to becoming an effective QI facilitator. They identified six characteristics of an effective partnership (Davis & Day, 2007) as important to their practice (see Figure 2).



Characteristics of an effective partnership



Figure 2: Characteristics of an effective partnership

In Table 1, facilitators provided examples of how they enact these characteristics reflected in their work.

Table 1: Characteristics of an effective partnership

Characteristic	What this looks like
Developing and maintaining genuine connectedness	Communicating in various forms: individual conversations, small group catch ups, Zoom meetings for larger meetings Acknowledging what partners are saying about their needs and capacity for involvement and responding accordingly Acknowledging all partners' contribution
Communicating clearly	Asking partners about their best mode and time of contact Sharing a clear meeting agenda with partners prior to the meeting Following up with brief minutes (in email body so it is easily visible) with actions clearly outlined
Recognising complementary expertise and roles	Learning about everyone's skillsets and abilities Having a good understanding of stakeholders' current work
Sharing decision making power	Engaging partners in co-design of the work Being clear about everyone's role Not making final decisions without everyone's input
Fostering active participation	Creating space and opportunity for everyone to contribute Creating varied ways and opportunities for partners to share, including offline if preferred Trying virtual meetings, because sometimes they have better attendance
Negotiating disagreement	Setting mutually agreed upon goals and ways of resolving disagreements from the outset Acknowledging difference of opinions with respect and empathy



5. Building the capacity of others



Facilitators identified that becoming an effective QI facilitator meant building QI capacity within their partnership and improvement teams, to support sustainability of the work and enable expansion of the work across their site. Facilitators build the capacity of people to be able to 'do the QI work' independently, as well as identify and support emerging 'QI champions' who might then lead improvement teams.

Facilitators shared the following ideas for building improvement team members' capacity:

- Recognising when team members are ready to work more autonomously and letting them go
- Asking team members to make recommendations about the next year's work

Facilitators have used the following approaches to develop QI champions:

- Modelling facilitation of QI activities.
- Sharing facilitation of meeting activities.
- Being transparent with emerging leaders about the process of building their capacity.

6. Practising professional self-care



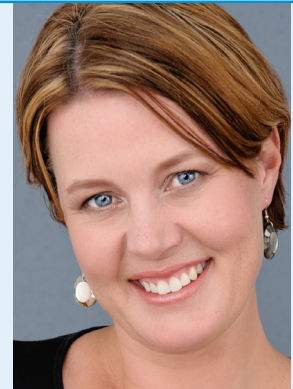
Facilitators' wellbeing and effectiveness are reliant on one another: to remain effective, facilitators should be watchful of their own morale and burnout, and seek support when necessary (Ritchie et al, 2020). Facilitators have found the following helpful for supporting their wellbeing.

- **Making the time for regular reflection**, whether that be formal supervision with a manager or less formal debriefing with peers.
- **Setting clear boundaries to your work** by creating a workplan and blocking out time for tasks, tracking and reviewing hours to ensure it aligns with forecasts and expectations, and adhering as much as possible to set work hours.
- **Celebrating each win** no matter how small, acknowledging that the work is complex and long-term so reflecting and acknowledging progress is therefore important.



**PROFILE: Leah Taylor****City of Casey Best Start Facilitator**

Leah has participated in the Centre for Community Child Health QI coaching since 2017. Here she shares her thoughts about her development as a QI facilitator over this period and what she sees as some of the key practices of the role.

**How has Leah developed as a QI facilitator over the last couple of years?**

Transitioning from driver to coach. Leah feels that a major change in her practice has been the shift from hands-on teaching, training and support of partners and their staff to a more hands-off coaching and advising approach. She acknowledges that depending on the context and the familiarity of the stakeholder with Best Start work she still sometimes needs to drive discussions and improvement work. However, as partners become skilled and she becomes more confident, she is increasingly able to sit back and facilitate others to do the QI thinking and doing.

Getting intentional. Leah notes that her approach to her work has also become more intentional. When planning meetings, she's very aware of her objectives and how to get there. Her communication to partners and their staff is carefully considered so that key messages are conveyed. She thinks deeply about how best to share the site's progress so that it engages and motivates stakeholders. She identifies and brings to her teams the QI tools that are best suited to their challenge.

What has Leah found useful to her development as a QI facilitator?

Fostering a desire for learning and a growth mindset. Leah has a desire for learning, and this means she's continuously looking for ways to learn new things, such as how to use different QI skills. She also recognises that being okay with 'failing' and understand its necessity for growth has helped her to experiment with her practice and subsequently develop. She shares this message with her partners to create a culture where the focus is giving things a go and learning.

Identifying a support network. Leah has a diverse support network, including coaches, supervisors, colleagues, and other Best Start facilitators. She has found it invaluable to be able to take uncertainties and challenges to these different support people to unpack and identify possible next steps.

What are the key practices of facilitating QI?

Beginning with and then maintaining engagement. Leah identifies engaging partners and building their commitment as foundational to QI work. She also recognises that engagement requires ongoing focus and work.

Starting small and getting going. Leah has found that you don't need too many people to come on board to start improvement work and have some quick wins. These quick wins in turn can encourage others to get involved.



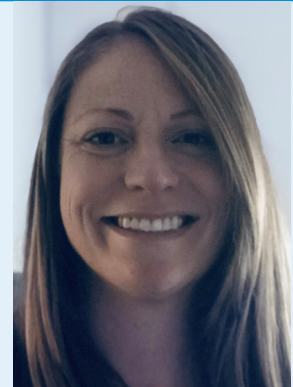
Holding positive regard for everyone involved, regardless of contribution or status. Leah sees that it's important for all stakeholders to see that their involvement is contributing to the outcome. She identifies the contribution of everyone involved and communicates the value of that involvement (e.g. community expertise, knowledge they have of families), even if it doesn't involve active participation in testing change ideas.

Identifying and recognising partner progress with QI. Leah takes each partner on a journey of learning as they address complicated systems and processes. She recognises that once partners see a problem as an opportunity to test something new, they have entered a culture of improvement and start driving their own QI work, at which point, she can play the role of 'cheerleader'.

PROFILE: **Sara McAlister**

Latrobe City Council Best Start Facilitator

Sara has also been a participant in the Centre for Community Child Health QI coaching since 2017. Here she shares her thoughts about her development as a QI facilitator over this period and what she sees as some of the key practices of the role.



How has Sara developed as a QI facilitator over the last couple of years?

Engaging those on the ground to create legitimacy. Sara notes that in the last couple of years she has focused her efforts on setting up multiple improvement teams and building the buy-in and capacity of the individual members. Prior to this she was primarily working with her partnership, engaging some partners one-on-one to undertake PDSA cycles. Whilst some valuable work was undertaken using this approach, it lacked momentum and she needed to continuously drive the work. Now, with practitioners and middle management engaged as members of improvement teams, they are determining their stretch goals, identifying change ideas and making changes to their practice and processes. With so many bought in

and making change, she has an increased sense of legitimacy with her partnership.

Pushing less and listening more. Sara has learnt that she doesn't need to push so hard to identify opportunities for improvement; rather these often present themselves when she is able to listen and create space for people to share their ideas and engage in dialogue. Sara reflects that in the past she had felt a pressure to be constantly identifying opportunities for PDSA cycles, and that this approach had sometimes gotten in the way of valuable, exploratory conversations. When she's experimented with becoming less attached to strictly following a meeting agenda, she's found she can be more present to the conversation and therefore able to facilitate conversations where individuals have identified their own change ideas.



What has Sara found useful to her development as a QI facilitator?

Acquiring a solid knowledge of key QI tools.

Learning how to use tools such as driver diagrams, run charts and tracking measures and indicators has made it easier for Sara to teach others how to use these tools and has improved her confidence as a facilitator.

Making time for self-reflection and using the right tool to support this process. Being reflective has helped Sara identify areas of improvement, and she often uses the '5 whys' tool to explore the causes or drivers of these.

Coaching and modelling. Not only has coaching helped strengthen Sara's content knowledge, it has also provided the opportunity for observing coaching and facilitation approaches and techniques, which she has then gone on to model with her partnership and improvement teams.

What are the key practices of facilitating QI?

Ensuring alignment between Best Start and partners' priorities. Sara has discovered that aligning the Best Start improvement work with partners' and improvement team members' existing work results in better buy-in because it doesn't require additional work for people.

Building improvement teams' ownership of their work. Sara has increasingly allowed her improvement teams to take control and ownership over the direction of the work and goal setting.

Being very clear about your aim. Sara has found that it's much easier to keep everyone on the same page if there is a clear aim and you can anchor an idea by asking, 'will this help us reach our aim?'

Not losing momentum. Not letting too much time lapse between meetings has helped Sara's improvement teams to feel connected and maintain momentum.

Using stories. Sara notes that QI can be very data driven and technical, and that using real-life stories about the people behind the data has helped bring this data to life.

Identifying your data sources. Sara has found that it's hard to motivate people if there's no data source to demonstrate improvement, and conversely that run charts with monthly (or more frequent) data excite improvement team members and partners about the progress being made.



Using the learnings from Best Start



The experience and insights of Best Start facilitators can be used by others to support their own practice improvement. To do this, facilitators are encouraged to reflect on each of the six practice domains and assess their own practice against each. Facilitators might ask themselves:

- How am I tracking in this domain?
- Does my practice feel strong or is there room for improvement?

Following this, facilitators are recommended to select just one or two domains at a time in which to build or strengthen their practice. Facilitators could lean on QI tools, such as the Model for Improvement, to:

- develop a short-term goal for each domain
- identify a measure for the goal
- brainstorm change ideas that could support progress towards the goal (the information under each domain above can support this brainstorming)
- test those change ideas.

Facilitators may want to connect with their peers, creating an informal ‘improvement team’ where they can provide accountability and support each other with their self-improvement work.

The Promising Practice series

The *Promising Practice in Best Start* series captures what is being learnt through Best Start about how to use quality improvement to increase participation in early years services. The series draws on insights from Best Start facilitators and is produced by the Centre for Community Child Health.

About Best Start

Best Start is a Victorian Department of Education and Training place-based early years initiative focused on increasing participation in key early years services, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability and Aboriginal children. There are 30 Best Start project sites across Victoria, six of which work specifically with local Aboriginal communities. The Centre for Community Child Health has been working alongside Best Start since 2016 to support the initiative’s implementation of a quality improvement approach.

For more information visit: [Supporting Best Start](#).

References

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The Centre for Community Child Health acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging.



Education and Training