CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SPECIFIC AIM

Chapter Purpose

Aim. To create a detailed, specific aim statement based on the selected theme and the global aim statement to further guide and focus improvement activities.

    Objectives. At the completion of this unit, you will be able to
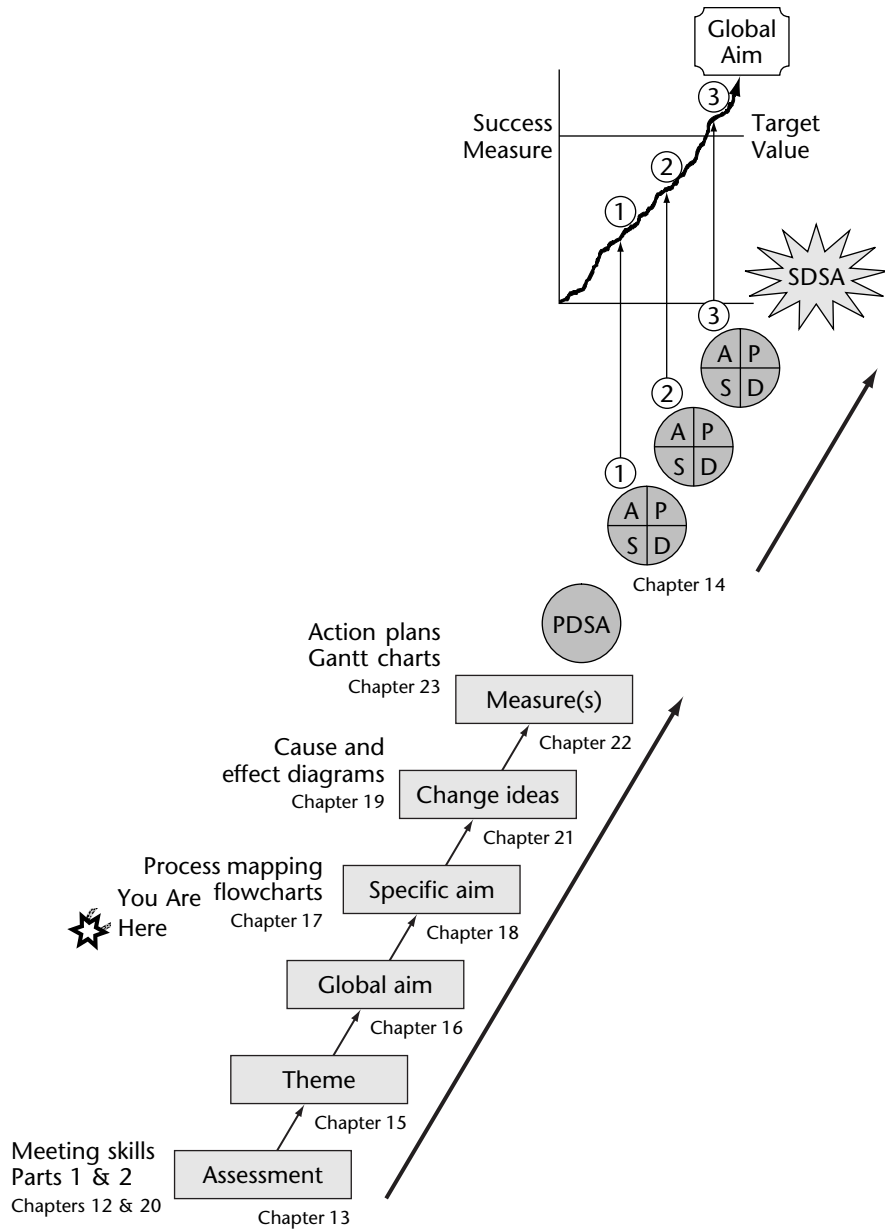
• Define what a specific aim is.

• Describe the connections between specific aim, process flow, global aim selection, and theme.
• Use the specific aim template.
• Describe the improvement ramp that leads microsystem members to meet overall improvement aims.

     This step in the microsystem improvement process follows your review of the process map (see Figure 18.1). After the current process is mapped, understood, and agreed upon, your next step, as described in this chapter, is to make a specific aim statement that provides a clear focus for the improvement.

What Is a Specific Aim?

The *specific aim* provides a detailed focus for improvement. It is based on the global aim statement, the flowchart, and an analysis of the overall process. It establishes the measurable outcomes you wish to achieve and a precise focus for tests of change.

FIGURE 18.1. IMPROVEMENT RAMP: SPECIFIC AIM.

Why Use a Specific Aim?

A good specific aim offers detailed focus for your improvement work. A good specific aim has a sharp focus. It specifies what you can improve now, usually something within your "control" so that you do not require additional "permission" to test a change and make an improvement. It also describes the measurable outcomes that you wish to achieve. Specifying and measuring these outcomes can help you maintain improvement intention and focus.

Where Do Specific Aims Come From?

There are many good sources from which you can develop promising change ideas that can be adapted to your local context, using the specific aim approach, and then tested out, using the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) method. Change ideas and specific aims frequently come from these five areas:

- *Process analysis.* Mapping the current process "as is" will usually reveal several specific steps that do not work as well as they might, and ideas for changing them arise as this is realized.
- *Cause and effect analysis.* Constructing a fishbone diagram (Chapter Nineteen) to explore the web of causes involved in the effects you are trying to improve will often prompt ideas about what might be changed in order to improve a desired outcome.
- *Direct observation.* Directly observing the actual work process can reveal steps that could be eliminated or that might work better.
- *Change concepts.* A wide variety of general suggestions have been developed for improving any process. Applying these ideas as part of a process analysis can identify numerous specific ideas about designing change.
- *Evidence-based and best practices.* Increasingly, the scientific literature about improving care will offer evidence in support of specific ideas or will make possible a formal comparative exploration of a best practice—the process of benchmarking (Mohr, Mahoney, Nelson, Batalden, & Plume, 1998).

Where Does the Specific Aim Fit in the Overall Improvement Process?

A global aim and theme usually end up with multiple specific aims linked to them. Start with one specific aim, and use the PDSA method to begin testing changes. Often, multiple specific aims and PDSA cycles will be helpful in achieving the global

aim identified. These tests of change can become progressively complex, as suggested by the *improvement ramp* diagram we are using throughout Part Two (see, for example, Figure 18.1). This idea was developed by Tom Nolan, Brian Joiner, and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (Langley, Nolan, Norman, Provost, & Nolan, 1996) and has been adapted by the authors of this book. An improvement ramp offers an overview of the sequence of changes involved in the improvement of a specific process.

The first test of change is often a relatively simple one. In the execution of that test additional ideas usually emerge that seem worth testing and that require a bit more time and effort to test. By sequencing the tests so that the easiest come early in the process, you can learn more about the global aim that has been selected and accelerate its realization. Once it is realized, you can take steps to standardize the new level of performance, using the standardize-do-study-act (SDSA) approach.

How Do You Write a Specific Aim?

Figure 18.2 offers a template for writing a clear specific aim statement. You will note that it invites clear, measurable outcomes and a target date for completion.

What Are the Next Steps?

It is common at this point to have more insight and understanding about the process you wish to improve and to have many ideas worth testing for change and improvement.

FIGURE 18.2. TEMPLATE FOR WRITING A SPECIFIC AIM STATEMENT.

Specific Aim Statement

Create a specific aim statement that will keep your focus clear and your work productive.

Use numerical goals, specific dates, and specific measures

Specific Aim: _____

_____

Measures: _____

_____

Case Studies

Intermediate Cardiac Care Unit (ICCU)

Based on the ICCU's overall picture of communication and flow, the ICCU lead improvement team selected its first specific aim. This specific aim states:

> *We aim to improve communication of patient plans* of *care,* including discharge, through an *interdisciplinary morning round approach starting February 27, 2006.* We will have *100% participation of all roles, 100% accuracy of plans of action,* and detailed discharge plans to facilitate bed availability for new admissions.

Plastic Surgery Section

Informed by the 5 P's, the theme of access improvement, and the flowchart of the current process for patients wishing breast reduction, the Plastic Surgery lead improvement team wrote its specific aim statement. This specific aim states:

> *We aim to reduce the backlog of patients by 50%, improve patient satisfaction* with scheduling, and *improve staff satisfaction within 6 months.*

Review Questions

1. Where does the specific aim fit in the overall improvement process?
2. How do the global aim and the flowchart inform your specific aim?
3. What does the specific aim template ask you to do?

Between Sessions Work

1. Create your specific aim based on your flowchart.

References

Langley, G. J., Nolan, K. M., Norman, C. L., Provost, L. P., & Nolan, T. W. (1996). *The improvement guide: A practical approach to enhancing organizational performance.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mohr, J., Mahoney, C. C., Nelson, E. C., Batalden, P. B., & Plume, S. K. (1998). Learning from the best: Clinical benchmarking for best patient care. In E. C. Nelson, P. B. Batalden, & J. C. Ryer (Eds.), *Clinical improvement action guide.* Oakbrook Terrace, IL: Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.