Making Use of Findings to Close the Loop

Continuous improvement is the central theme and rationale for carrying out institutional effectiveness plans (IE Plans). Much work is involved in the planning, execution, and analysis of IE Plan activities. This work is wasted unless IE Plan findings are used to inform decision making.

When we use the results or findings of an IE Plan to make decisions, we are “closing the loop.” The use of findings is always documented in Action Plans, which are part of every IE Plan. The following are examples of how planners have utilized this kind of information to “close the loop.” You can see the seven parts of an IE Plan in action in these examples.

Operational Outcome Example 1: Too Long, So Long

The Director of Human Resources at MCC noticed that many hiring processes were failing because qualified candidates were accepting offers elsewhere, so she decided that a goal would be to improve the hiring rate. The Director wondered how the hiring managers perceived the hiring process. After administering a survey of five questions randomly to 20 of the 50 hiring managers, she found that the managers were not happy with the speed of the hiring process. She concluded that something needed to be done to accelerate the process.

After consulting with her staff, the HR team agreed that a good objective (outcome) would be to reduce the hiring process time by 50%, from eight weeks to four weeks (target). The measure would be the elapsed time between the interview and the first day of work for each new hire.

The HR department, working in collaboration with the hiring managers, began maintaining a log recording all interview dates and times for open positions, along with the names of interviewees, and the first day the successful candidates reported to work. The log was raw data and was included as an attachment to the IE Plan.

At the end of the academic year they analyzed the data and found that they had managed to cut the average hire time by 25%, half of the targeted time frame. The HR department identified a number of factors that were contributing to the prolongation of the hiring process within the district. One of the factors (findings) was unfamiliarity with the hiring software on the part of hiring managers, which caused longer times for them to navigate the system.

The HR department formed an action plan to begin offering training classes to all hiring managers covering the hiring software. In subsequent IE Plan cycles, the HR department continued to assess (measure) the hiring process performance to determine what additional improvements could be implemented.

Discussion:

In this example, you can see that the HR department saw a problem (hiring processes failing) and decided a goal would be to improve the hiring rate. More data collected from hiring managers suggested that speeding up the process would help, so this become an objective. The measure was time, which established a baseline of performance and a target value. Data collected during the year showed improvements, but not as much as they anticipated. Their findings identified a potential root cause of unfamiliarity with the hiring software. The findings informed them to train hiring managers in the software, the action plan. The action plan was the first of many steps to close the loop.
Operational Outcome Example 2: A Well-Kept Secret

The Dean at a campus noticed that the number of students seeking counseling and career services had slightly declined over the last two years. He wanted to know what could be causing this, and thought that a goal should be to increase the utilization of counseling and career services by students.

In the first semester, he developed a five-minute survey for the students who sought these services. After analyzing the survey results, he found that there were several reasons that might be contributing to the decline of students seeking counseling and career center services. One possible reason was that the students weren’t aware that the counseling and career services office existed until they were referred to it by another campus office. In this first semester, activity logs were kept, and the results showed that a total of 768 students were served by counseling and career services. These logs were uploaded, and attached to the IE Plan for supporting documentation.

In the second semester, the Dean and staff began exploring ways to create more awareness among students of the services offered at the counseling and career services office. One of the avenues was to put posters in student centers and libraries across the campus to advertise their services. An objective or outcome was set to increase the number of students being served by 10%, which represented a target increase of 77 students per semester. Usage logs were again kept.

At the end of the second semester, a total of 791 students were served. The logs with this data were also attached to the IE Plan. This was about a 3% increase, which was far less than the goal of a 10% increase.

The outcome was marked as partially met in the IE Plan, and the Dean again met with his staff to develop findings from the data. Staff members questioned whether the original survey should be repeated (especially expanding the population of students to which it might be administered), and decided to contact the web team about advertising their services online. These steps comprised the action plan of the IE Plan, and would thereby form the basis of further improvement.

Discussion:

The Dean and staff noted that career and counseling services were suffering from declining use by students, so a goal to increase utilization was created. Baseline utilization data were collected and stored as an attachment on the IE Plan so that progress could be measured. The measure was the number of students using the services in a semester. A specific objective or outcome of increasing participation by 10% (a target value) per semester was created with an activity of placing advertising posters in key campus areas. At the end of the second semester, the data showed that only 23 additional students had been served. These data were also added to the IE Plan as an attachment. Findings (conclusions based on the data) led to an action plan that would close the loop and lead to further improvement.