

## Oklahoma's Quality Assurance Experience:

# Continuous Improvement Through Employee Empowerment, Teamwork, Diversity and Best Practices

By Deborah K. Boyer

Today's correctional agencies are faced with many challenges — prison overcrowding, staffing shortages and an ever-increasing demand to operate cheaper, better and faster. Correctional agencies must find ways to operate more efficiently and effectively and reduce costs, while ensuring public safety remains the top priority. As the second largest state agency in Oklahoma, with more than 4,600 full-time employees and a fiscal year 2008 budget in excess of \$535 million, the Oklahoma Department of Corrections (ODOC) is faced with similar challenges. In an effort to proactively address these challenges, Director Justin Jones created a Quality Assurance Unit in January 2006.

Why create a Quality Assurance Unit in a government agency such as ODOC? John Ryan, in an American Society for Quality (ASQ) white paper titled *Making the Economic Case for Quality*, discusses a review of Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award applicants by the U.S. General Accounting Office. The U.S. Congress asked the GAO to examine the impact of formal quality management practices on the performance of U.S. companies. The principal finding was: "Companies that adopted quality management practices experienced an overall improvement in corporate performance. In nearly all cases, companies that used total quality management practices achieved better employee relations, higher productivity, greater customer satisfaction, increased market share and profitability." Ryan further states, "The study also identified six common features contributing to improved performance that appeared consistently among the companies' quality efforts: customer focus, management leadership, employee involvement, open corporate culture, fact-based decision-making and partnership with suppliers."<sup>1</sup>

Many of these same factors are found within the vision statement of ODOC, which states that the department "will create a culture that empowers individuals, encourages teamwork, employs best practices and embraces diversity." Thus, the DOC set a course to create a Quality Assurance

Unit that would embody the agency's vision through continuous improvement.

### The Quality Assurance System

Quality assurance in ODOC is a philosophy and a strategy for continuous improvement at every level of the organization in an effort to: 1) ensure the best allocation of resources; 2) provide the most efficient and effective operations based on continuous improvement; and 3) ensure creation and delivery of quality (best practice), results-driven programs and services to best fulfill the department's vision and mission. Several ingredients contribute to the success of a quality assurance effort: leadership commitment, employee empowerment and organizational transparency. Leadership must be committed to the effort and to making it a part of the organizational culture — incorporating it into the way business is done on a daily basis at every level in the organization.<sup>2</sup> Employees are the greatest asset of any organization, and employees must be involved, encouraged and empowered to share their knowledge and



ideas for improving work processes and making changes in the organization. Organizational transparency is an absolute necessity. Employees who are invested in the continuous improvement of the organization want to know the organization is listening to their ideas and suggestions and acting on them.

## Organizational Reviews

One of the key components of the ODOC Quality Assurance System is the use of organizational review panels composed of internal and external subject matter experts from other organizations who partner with the agency to examine operational areas and work processes and make recommendations for improvement. These experts bring knowledge, skills and unique experiences and perspectives to the organizational review process.

Most recently, the DOC acquired multisite videoconferencing capabilities and has been able to involve panel members outside of Oklahoma. These partnering organizations exemplify true collaboration in that they allow their staff to participate in the organizational review process at no cost to the department. This self-designed process provides an opportunity to examine work performed, reasons for the work performed, processes utilized to perform the work, ways in which those processes can be improved and how those processes can be measured. The cornerstone of the review process is a surveying component whereby input is sought from employees of the area under review, agency leadership, and other internal and external stakeholders in the area being reviewed.

Each employee of the area is asked to respond to a customized survey, including questions such as: "What are your duties and responsibilities, including the percentage of time spent and the frequency? What linkages exist between these duties and responsibilities and those per-

formed by others in the unit or agency?" These questions provide an opportunity to review employee duties, links to other areas internal and external to the area under review, as well as span-of-control and supervision issues. They also provide information to the organizational review panel so that it can examine job descriptions and performance appraisal accountabilities and measurements.

In addition to these questions, employees in the area under review are asked to identify specific process improvements they would recommend to achieve quality assurance goals. This empowers employees to impact the panel's understanding of the operation and be involved in the process by making specific suggestions for improvement. Further, employees are asked to complete a 111-question employee attitude survey. This survey provides a means of assessing employee perceptions about the agency; identifying problems; and obtaining input on a variety of areas such as internal communications, job satisfaction, staff cooperation, safety and security, staffing and promotions, training, and workplace diversity. Employees are asked to create a flow chart of their primary work processes so that the organizational review panel has a clear understanding of the work performed and the major activities associated with the performance of that work. Employees are also interviewed, and site visits are conducted as part of the process. Interview questions are typically related to performance of primary work processes. Interviewers also ask employees whether they have the proper tools, equipment and training to perform their jobs; what their greatest challenges are on the job and how the agency can help address those challenges; and what processes are cumbersome and how they can be improved.

A survey is also developed and distributed to agency upper management staff, which includes wardens, district supervisors and administrative unit heads. These man-



Courtesy Oklahoma Department of Corrections

The organizational review panel is hard at work.

### Here's What Organizational Review Process Participants Have to Say ...

- "I like the use of external experts in reviewing the organization. The exchange of information is extremely valuable. The department benefits from the expertise of the panel members, and the panel members benefit from the discussion and exchange of information and ideas that may be applicable to their own programs."
- "I greatly appreciate the opportunity to have an outside perspective on our unit from professionals ..."
- "The panel members were extremely professional, knowledgeable and committed to excellence. Their willingness to devote time and effort to assisting the agency with this endeavor was very much appreciated."
- "It was a great opportunity to get a better understanding and insight into another state agency."

agers are asked to respond to questions about the area under review, including performance expectations and the value of the area to the agency and to the public. Group members are also asked for their input on any unnecessary duplications, disconnects or inefficiencies, as well as for their specific recommendations for improvement. Not only does this provide management a voice in the organizational review process but survey feedback from management staff provides an agency director with valuable insight into the philosophies and thinking of agency management staff. Because many functions are performed across the agency, functional groups are considered to be primary stakeholders and are surveyed based on questions similar to those on the employee survey to ensure their input is also given full consideration.

A customized environmental scan survey is developed specific to each area under review and distributed to a random sample of Oklahoma state agencies, correctional departments nationally, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, private companies in Oklahoma and various other groups. The purpose of this environmental scan is to look outward to identify best practices that could potentially help ODOC improve performance. For example, the survey gathers comparison information (i.e., how ODOC compares to other correctional departments) as well as information regarding performance measures being utilized, challenges related to the area under review and how those challenges have been addressed.

Ultimately, organizational review panels use all of the information gathered to conduct a comprehensive examination of the area under review to make recommendations for short-term and long-term improvements. As part of the process, organizational review panels are also responsible for interviewing the agency's executive staff and working with staff from the area under review to identify a "desired state" or vision for the areas, including performance measurements. Written reports of panel findings are reviewed by the agency director, governing board and other stakeholders.

### Progress and Results

- ✓ A contract was established with Integris Corporate Assistance to provide employee assistance services.
- ✓ The cost of employee assistance services was reduced from \$3.20 per employee per month to 83 cents per employee per month.
- ✓ The Tulsa Correctional Emergency Response Team was eliminated at an estimated cost savings of more than \$14,000.
- ✓ A process action team was established to develop a uniform escape protocol for community corrections.
- ✓ All halfway house contracts are being rewritten.
- ✓ A Victim Advisory Council was established to serve as a resource in developing a strategic plan for victim services and to provide ongoing guidance regarding program development.
- ✓ A Victim Satisfaction Survey was developed.
- ✓ A toll-free line for out-of-state callers was established.
- ✓ A centralized volunteer database was created to include knowledge, skills and abilities information so volunteers can be utilized for occupational purposes as well as programmatic purposes.
- ✓ An exit survey system was established for volunteers.
- ✓ A performance evaluation system was created for volunteers.
- ✓ A list serve of national quality administrators has been established.

### Quality Councils and Process Action Teams

Quality councils and process action teams (PATs) constitute the second component of the DOC's Quality Assurance System. The Executive Quality Council, composed of executive-level leadership, is responsible for: 1) identifying the department's quality assurance philosophy or strategic goals; 2) supporting, modeling and promoting the quality assurance system; 3) identifying and prioritizing critical issues with agencywide impact and working with the Quality Assurance Unit to initiate organizational reviews or charter PATs to address those issues; and 4) providing guidance, support and resources necessary to effect organizational changes resulting from reviews and PATs' recommendations.

Local quality councils, made up of management staff, are responsible for: 1) supporting, modeling and promoting the Quality Assurance System at their respective work locations; 2) identifying and prioritizing issues with work-location-specific impact and chartering local PATs to address those issues; 3) submitting issues with agencywide impact to the Executive Quality Council for consideration; 4) notifying the Quality Assurance Unit when PATs have been chartered; and 5) providing the guidance, support and resources necessary to effect changes resulting from local

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The Quality Assurance Unit competed against 20 other state agencies during Quality Oklahoma Team Day, sponsored by the Office of Personnel Management, and was recognized with a Governor's Commendation and the Quality Crown Award of Excellence.

During a recent legislatively mandated top-to-bottom audit of the department of corrections, the department was commended by MGT of America on its quality assurance efforts.

PATs' reports. These councils develop written charter agreements that empower PATs to act.

PATs are employee teams organized around a problem, issue or work process. They are guided by a written chartering agreement; typically comprise five to 10 members; and have a designated team leader, facilitator and scribe. PATs utilize quality principles, practices and techniques to analyze problems or examine work processes as identified in the chartering agreement; make data-driven recommendations; and submit a written report summarizing the team's activities and recommendations.

Currently, employee teams are working on issues and problems related to offender suicide prevention, nurse scheduling, food service, officer uniforms, escapes in community corrections, communications in community corrections, co-occurring treatment disorders, case management and a variety of other topics. The Quality Assurance Unit supports these program components by providing training courses at ODOC in "Quality Awareness, Teams, Tools and Techniques" and "Facilitation Skills"; providing trained facilitators for teams; providing support and serving as process guides; and serving as the repository for team agreements and reports for reference as new teams are chartered as well as for archival purposes.

Most recently, the Quality Assurance Unit has partnered to deliver training as part of the agency's Correctional Leadership Development Program, and teams of program participants are working to address issues related to affirmative action, nurse recruitment and retention, and sex offender treatment. Employees who are involved in these PATs are using their knowledge, skills and experiences to truly make a difference at ODOC.

## Organizational Transparency

Agency employees are kept informed about progress related to the agency's quality assurance effort through agencywide *Communications Bulletins* issued by e-mail and posted online, as well as through access to organizational review executive summaries and other information on the Quality Assurance System Web page at [www.doc.state.ok.us/adminservices/quality/index.html](http://www.doc.state.ok.us/adminservices/quality/index.html). Most recently, a Quality Assurance Chat column was added to the monthly agency newsletter. These "chat" columns feature interviews with staff who relate their positive experiences of participating in organizational reviews or serving on process action teams and encourage others to participate as well.

## Conclusion

In summary, the Quality Assurance System is composed of organizational reviews, quality councils and PATs supported by a training component. These reviews, councils and teams all contribute to the Oklahoma Department of Corrections being a continuously improving organization through employee empowerment, teamwork, diversity and best practices.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ryan, John. 2008. *Making the economic case for quality*, American Society for Quality white paper. Milwaukee: American Society for Quality. Retrieved on April 15, 2008, from [www.asq.org/pdf/economic-case/economic-case.pdf](http://www.asq.org/pdf/economic-case/economic-case.pdf).

U.S. General Accounting Office. 1991. *Management practices: U.S. companies improve performance through quality*, report No. GAO/NSIAD-91-190. Gaithersburg, Md.: U.S. General Accounting Office. (May).

<sup>2</sup> Townsend, Patrick L. and Joan E. Gebhardt. 2007. *The executive guide to understanding and implementing employee engagement programs: Expand production capacity, increase revenue, and save jobs*. Milwaukee: American Society for Quality, Quality Press.

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