Towards Continuous Personal and Organizational Improvement

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Adopting a model of continuous improvement is relevant not just for individuals but also for organizations, and SGIM is already taking steps in this direction. There are critical questions the Society needs to answer about its current state—what is SGIM like when it is at its best, and what is SGIM like when it is at its worst?

My Forum column last month addressed an important element of medical culture, namely how our focus on being “strong” as physicians can make it difficult to get help for the emotional distress that often accompanies involvement in medical error. I argued that this is, in fact, a false culture of strength, and that our lack of self-awareness and unwillingness to accept help are important contributors to the issues of burnout that were spotlighted at the 2017 Annual Meeting. I also suggested that deepening our understanding of medical cultures is important to us, both individually and collectively, as we seek to increase our effectiveness.

In this column, I explore a related, but distinct, dimension of medical culture—how our focus on perfectionism has the paradoxical effect of inhibiting our willingness to seek meaningful feedback on our individual and organizational performance and adopt a culture of continuous improvement.

Dr. Michael Myers recently published an article in Psychology Today entitled “The Tyranny of Perfectionism” which notes that perfectionism in physicians “is truly a double-edged sword. Striving for excellence and precision enables applicants to get into medical school, prestigious residency programs, and the ‘right job’ upon graduation. Furthermore, this trait over time helps doctors in keeping on top of their game. On the negative side is pain. The inevitable losses and failures of any physician in today’s medical world are very tough for perfectionistic doctors.”

I would argue that the tyranny of perfectionism extends to interfering with seeking the feedback we all need to improve. As a trainee, answering the question “how am I doing?” is relatively straightforward. Medical students, residents, and fellows are provided a steady stream of formal and informal feedback. Once you finish training, the feedback abruptly slows. Faculty may have annual reviews, but the value of this feedback in charting a course forward is often limited. I am a physician-scientist, which meant the metrics for success were in some ways clearer—am I publishing enough papers and getting enough grants? But, as my career progressed, judging my progress based on papers and grants seemed hollow.

I ultimately concluded that I was asking the wrong question. The issue is not “how am I doing?” but rather “am I positioned for continuous improvement?” My background in patient safety suggested that the first step was ensuring I had an accurate understanding of the current state. Around this time, I was also interested in undertaking more formal leadership responsibilities. Several of my trusted senior colleagues suggested that working closely with a leadership coach could be helpful. My journey of continuous self-improvement had begun!

The coach began by asking me for the names of several people with whom I had worked closely so he could interview them each for an hour. This should have been my first clue that it was time to buckle my seatbelt. The interviews were not only going to simply explore what I did well and where there were opportunities for improvement but also to focus on “what’s Tom like when he’s at his best?” and “what’s Tom like when he’s at his worst?” And, to add insult to injury, the coach put me through a battery of personality tests.

In advance of our second meeting, the coach sent me the results of his interviews: 10, single-spaced pages of reflections from folks I had handpicked as knowing me well. It was fun to read the compliments, but I was not prepared for page after page of what I’m like at my worst. My first reaction was “I know who said that!” and plotting my revenge. After my wife persuaded me that perhaps there was a more constructive response, I mentally tallied all the positive comments, which seemed to be more frequent than the negative comments, and declared that the overall assessment was that I was doing well. Unfortunately, the coach quickly dismissed this mental paradigm, and asserted that all of us, no matter how senior and experienced, have strengths and weaknesses, and that we just have to live with...
this balance. Bruised ego in hand, I moved forward.

I have found this coaching to be challenging but extremely valuable. The following key lessons have emerged:

- **The power of habits.** Over our careers, all of us develop deeply ingrained habits of thinking and acting. While these habits are often integral to our success in earlier stages of our careers, they can be counterproductive to learning new skills. The fact that taking the next steps in my career involved learning a new set of skills rather than just working harder was encouraging, since it was difficult for me to imagine how working harder could be possible. Yet, changing and learning new habits is more challenging than I imagined, and has required understanding how these habits developed and how they relate to my personality.

- **Personalities matter.** While each of us thinks we are unique, it turns out that there are a relatively limited number of personality types, and understanding both our personalities and the personalities of those we regularly work with can be extremely valuable. My leadership coach is a big fan of the enneagram², which I found especially valuable in highlighting how we behave differently when we are feeling self-confident compared with when we are feeling stressed. Other leadership coaches use “animal types,” derivations from the Myers-Briggs personality assessment. Regardless of which assessment you use, a clear understanding of how your personality functions and how you can interact productively with others is a worthwhile investment.

- **Continuous feedback is critical.** A vital element of a continuous personal improvement mentality is regularly seeking detailed feedback. While it is not practical to get feedback on a regular basis that is as in-depth as what I received through the coaching process, my team has invested in providing each other with annual 360° feedback. Our entire center staff provides detailed feedback to everyone else on the team and also completes a detailed self-assessment. This feedback is anonymized, compiled, and provided back to each individual, who then uses it as the basis for their improvement plan. Without this comprehensive feedback, the improvement process would come to a halt.

- **Sharing your improvement intentions.** Continuous self-improvement is not a private undertaking. A critical element of our team process has been to follow up the feedback by developing focused improvement plans with short-, medium-, and long-term goals, and then for everyone to share their improvement goals with the rest of the team. This sharing step is essential as it helps individuals refine their goals and allows the rest of the team to provide ongoing, real-time feedback. For example, knowing that one of my improvement goals has been to do a better job of sharing my emotions has helped my team provide positive reinforcement when they see a behavior change in this direction and gentle encouragement if they see backsliding.

Adopting a model of continuous improvement is relevant not only for individuals but also for organizations, and SGIM is already taking steps in this direction. There are critical questions the Society needs to answer about its current state—what is SGIM like when it is at its best, and what is SGIM like when it is at its worst? What are the habits that we have developed that might have contributed to the organization’s success to date but are holding us back from achieving the next level of effectiveness? If we were to analyze the organization’s personality using an enneagram or animal types, what would we find?

We receive some degree of organizational feedback from the regular...
membership surveys, but these occur infrequently and therefore are not necessarily a good guide to enhancing the organization’s performance. In last month’s Forum, Madeline Sterling and Barbara Turner summarized the information that was gathered from a member feedback exercise at the 2017 Annual Meeting. Many participants emphasized the need for SGIM to develop a host of stronger partnerships, for example with trainees, patients, hospital medicine physicians, and like-minded organizations. Others stressed the key role of continued expansion of the Society’s emphasis on health policy and advocacy. To take our self-assessment to the next level, in the next few months Bob Fletcher will be leading the organization on a more detailed journey of reflecting on challenges and opportunities for SGIM going forward. Bob would welcome your feedback on this issue, and can be reached at robert_fletcher@hms.harvard.edu.

Council has also moved forward in articulating our commitments and intentions in working with each other for the coming year. These were developed at the June Council retreat, and will guide the work of the Council going forward. I welcome your suggestions for strengthening this list (on right).

Ultimately, embracing a life-long commitment to continuous self-improvement, whether as a person or as an organization, requires rejecting a culture of perfectionism, doggedly pursuing meaningful and actionable feedback about your current performance, developing improvement plans, and sharing these improvement intentions with those around you.

References

Council Commitments for Working Together
Agreed upon June 7, 2017

1. Be prepared—read all materials before meetings/calls
2. Be present—no multi-tasking during meetings
3. Assume positive intent—presuppose others are trying to do the right thing
4. Let go of prior identity within SGIM constituencies
5. Commit to communicating effectively, including:
   a. Be direct (no triangulation)
   b. Be honest and kind with each other
   c. Be willing to listen
   d. Communicate along the way as decisions are being made/keep people in the loop. Share information, even if it’s not popular
   e. Communicate with the membership. Remain open to input from the members
   f. Be collegial/Do not shut down the opinions of others
6. Be willing to step up/volunteer/take on new tasks/follow through
7. Challenge each other
8. Do not personalize things
9. Be solution oriented
10. Support council decisions (even if you did not agree). Work as a unified team.
11. Consider impact when making decisions (on staff, volunteers, and members)
12. Be willing to take on the sacred cows
13. Be each other’s champions
14. Have fun
15. Use ZOOM, including video
16. Keep SGIM’s interest first