# Bright Spots: Finding inspiration in what works

CQI teams often develop strategies by identifying areas needing improvement, drilling down on barriers, and coming up with strategies to reduce or eliminate those barriers. When teams feel stuck during strategy development, they can find inspiration by looking internally at their high performers. These high performers are sometimes called bright spots—they are programs, sites, or staff achieving high outcomes related to a specific challenge where others are struggling. When your CQI team needs inspiration or new ideas, try to identify high performers, determine what they are doing differently, and then spread their approach to others.

An approach to using bright spots in CQI

After identifying an area to improve, the next step in the CQI cycle is to get specific about the challenge or opportunity for improvement (see Exhibit 1). By identifying a specific challenge, a team can determine the drivers or root causes of the challenge, which helps to narrow in on what types of strategies may be useful. For example, instead of naming under-enrollment as the challenge, a team could get specific by naming recruitment of fathers. The team may also identify lack of interest and varying job schedules as key root causes. By getting specific about challenges and root causes, teams can look internally to see if there are sites or staff that appear to be thriving where others are struggling. If a program is under-enrolling fathers, for example, the CQI team can look for specific sites that excel in recruiting fathers and determine whether the factors that drive their success can be replicated in other sites.

Exhibit 1: CQI Cycle
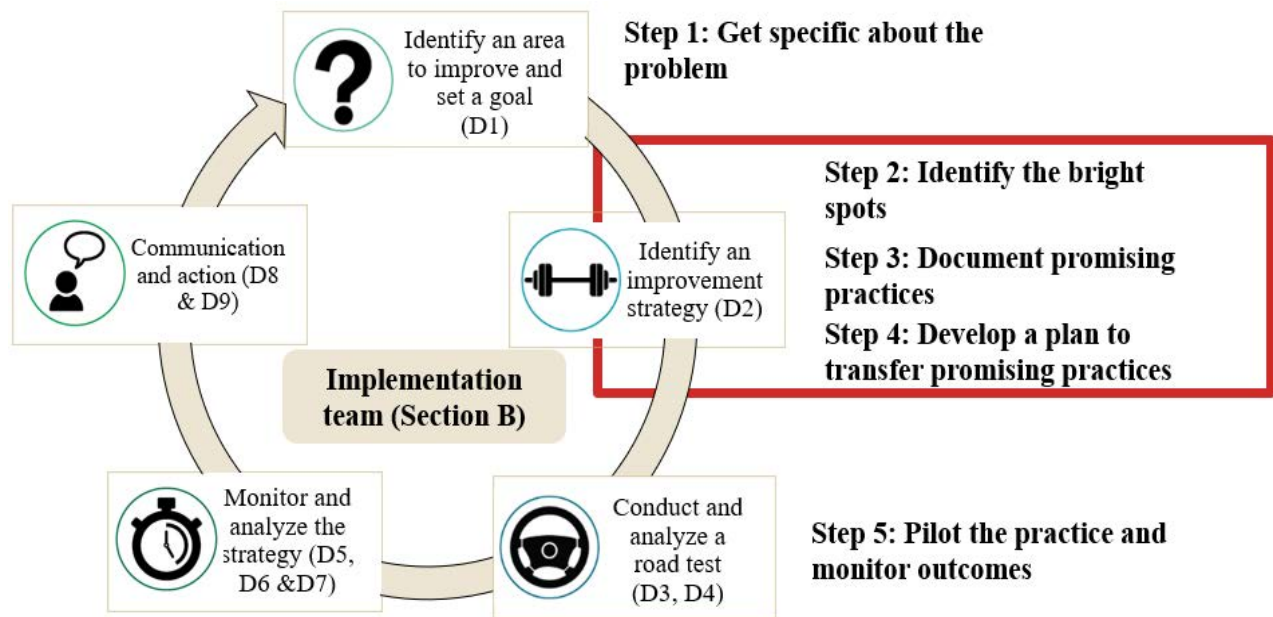
Below are steps for using the Bright Spots approach:

🔍 **Identify the bright spots.** Bright spots are programs, sites, or staff that achieve higher outcomes than others, drawing on similar resources. Before identifying bright spots, be clear about the pool of possible bright spots. Exhibit 2 illustrates different levels of bright spots: you may have a staff member or a site that is a bright spot relative to other staff or sites. Or your program may be a bright spot for other programs that struggle in an area where your program consistently outperforms targets.

Exhibit 2: Levels of bright spots

Consider the nature of the challenge. For a facilitation challenge, you may seek out staff who are successful in fostering participant engagement as measured by satisfaction ratings. For an enrollment challenge, you might seek out sites that consistently hit their targets. Or consider the program level by consulting research on successful programs or connecting with other grant recipients through your family assistance program specialist (FPS). Looking outside your program can be useful even if you have identified bright spots among your sites or staff.

Programs can draw on a variety of methods to identify bright spots, including using data or asking for nominations. For example, a team might explore workshop completion data by facilitator and flag facilitators who are exceeding the program's completion target. To weigh options, use the methods matrix in Appendix A.

Understand and document the practice. Once a team has identified a bright spot, the next step is to discover what the bright spot staff or site is doing differently to support higher outcomes. It is important to identify the success factor(s), or what practices make the bright spot different from what is done at other sites or by other staff. To conduct a collaborative activity to catalog staff practices and success factors, consider using the facilitated activity in Appendix B with program staff. As an alternative to the collaborative activity, or if the collaborative activity does not yield enough insight about success factors, the CQI team can interview staff to learn more about practices that are supporting their success. To ensure interviews go beyond the surface, try an Appreciative Inquiry approach to questioning. Instead of asking staff to describe their best practices, which they may not be consciously thinking about, ask staff to walk through a time when they excelled at achieving the outcome of interest and document themes. Use the template for bright spots interviews in Appendix C.

Transfer the practice to others. The final step is to spread the successful practice to other sites or staff. Create written guides or trainings to share the practice(s). Recruit bright spot staff to support this process, as they can share useful tips and describe the value of the practice(s) at their site. Avoid framing the bright spot site as "better" than the other sites, as that could create bad feelings that will get in the way of your efforts to transfer practices. Instead, frame the effort as knowledge sharing. You may also share data the team gathered related to the challenge to reinforce the importance of addressing it.

Next steps

Road test the practice at each site and monitor outcome data to determine whether the effort is supporting improved outcomes. See Step 4 in the CQI worksheet for information on conducting a full test.

If the team does not see improved outcomes, explore different explanations including:

- **The CQI team misidentified success factors.** Go back through interview notes with the possibility in mind that the team missed key success factors or identified the wrong practices as essential.

- **The context across sites was too varied**. Ask receiving sites about their context (e.g., level of resources, nature of the site/location). You may discover the sites are too different to facilitate successful transferring of practices.

- **Staff at receiving sites did not implement the practice properly**. Determine barriers to implementing the practice as intended. These could include spotty documentation of how to implement or staff resistance at receiving sites, as examples.

If the issue is related to success factors or implementation barriers, talk to staff, develop tweaks, and test again.

Appendix A: Methods matrix -- Identifying bright spots

Programs can use a variety of methods to identify bright spots. Use the table below to understand the benefits and disadvantages of each method, as well as tips.

	What is it?	Benefits	Disadvantages	Tips
Quantitative				
SMART goals	Define success with a SMART goal and use your data to identify staff or sites exceeding the goal	Comprehensive (includes all sites or staff) and objective assessment of which staff or sites are high performers	• May not capture differences in context • May not be available for all relevant outcomes	Look for examples of sustained success; at a minimum, look at data points at two different time periods to ensure the success is not a fluke
Outliers	Find the average of your outcome of interest (e.g., fathers enrolled per month), and look for staff or sites exceeding the average			
Qualitative				
Nominations	Ask staff and/or clients to nominate practices related to specific challenges (e.g., engaging youth)	Inclusive and gives voice to staff and clients about what they think works	• Contingent on staff or clients deciding to nominate, so the search for bright spots may be less comprehensive • Nominations are unlikely to consider context	The CQI team should define nomination criteria—if the team is seeking practices for engaging fathers in workshops, be specific about this focus
Observations	Have members of the CQI team directly observe practices related to the program's specific challenge (e.g., engaging clients during the first workshop session)	Allows CQI team members, who know the challenge well, to assess practices and approaches	• Observing several staff or sites can be labor intensive • Observations are point-in-time, so the team may miss effective practices • Not all practices are observable	Use a structured form to ensure that observers consistently document what about the practice or approach is different and exemplary
Appreciative inquiry interviews	Ask staff to consider when they were at their best related to a challenge: *Tell me about a time when everyone in your workshop was engaged and participating. What happened?*	Staff may not be conscious of successful practices; the Appreciative Inquiry approach helps to surface them	• Can be time-consuming • Individual interviews may not capture differences in context	To engage staff in improvement efforts, have staff use a structured form and interview each other

Appendix B: Documenting success factors – Collaborative Activity

Help program staff consider what about a bright spot practice they think makes a difference—what are the success factors? Use the 4Ps of implementation—people, processes, principles, and products (such as tools and training)—to structure feedback. To facilitate the activity:

Step 1. Share the bright spot practice you want to better understand. For example, your CQI team has identified a site that far exceeds its workshop completion targets. Describe the site and its workshop structure and curricula so the group has context for the discussion.

Step 2. Create a grid with a row for each of the 4Ps. Ask staff to consider what the site does to support the practice (high completion in this example). Consider people, processes, principles, and products. For each of these, what are the distinguishing factors that drive success?

Step 3. Discuss how staff know they are success factors. Have they examined data? Is it based on anecdotal observations?

Step 4. As a group, pick the most promising and transferrable success factors and develop a plan to implement them in other sites.

Example: Success factors identified by HMRF grant recipients for encouraging workshop completion

	What are your success factors for encouraging participants to complete the workshop?
People	First contact with potential participant is key! That first contact can encourage enrollment — Open communication between staff in all roles of the program — Taking time during enrollment to make sure participants understand the program, both expectation of them and what it includes — Willingness to create space for make-ups — Ask for participation feedback — Staff that are genuine & truly want to help/teach to their community. This helps keep the participant engaged until the very end.
Processes	We connect with our dads through our coaches, our intake team, and our facilitators. We make sure they know how much we care before we try to teach them anything caring — We provide food to participants — We provide a roadmap and week by week overview to help participants understand what's coming next — We contact our dads via text the day before class to get confirmation they are attending. If they don't show up, we call them during class to see what's going on and try to get them on zoom to participate in class — We have added a perfect attendance incentive — Childcare opportunities and easy ways to make up by dropping in
Principles	Being understanding to clients reasoning — We create a welcoming, and sincerely caring environment. — Connecting and being empathetic to the client's needs
Products (tools/training)	Use a program called Keap to text our Dad's reminders as well as keeping notes on each client and track when they are called and how often contact is made. — Virtual program options with quick zoom training for participants as needed — Use a program called Monday to track our dad's progress through every class as well as send out automatic class make up videos. — We use Salesforce to track clients' participation and to know when and what Workshop is going to need to be make-up

Appendix C: Documenting the practice – Interview template

Another way to learn about success factors is through in-depth interviews. Use this template to guide in-depth interviews that drill beneath the surface to understand successful practices.

Name the challenge (remember to be specific!): Click or tap here to enter text.

Before interviewing bright spot staff, make sure you have a general understanding of the processes or activities used by other sites and staff who are not experiencing the same outcomes achieved by the bright spots. Bright spot sites or staff are typically doing something that other sites or staff are not doing, so it is important to understand how others perform the tasks (at least, on a very basic level).

Example: We know that many of the fatherhood sites send recruiting teams to events and community fairs to distribute pamphlets and talk to prospective clients about the parenting program. In the high-performing site, the recruiting team includes fathers who have completed the parenting program.

Interview questions

Describe a specific, successful example of doing the practice. Listen for differences compared to practices of the other sites or staff. Ask specific follow-up questions about different steps in the process to ensure you hear key details:

Example: Walk me through a recent recruitment outreach effort that was successful. How did you decide where to go? Who was there? How did you decide who to approach? What did you say?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Explain how you [*fill in practice*]. Ask this question for each potential success factor you hear in the story (for instance, if you hear in the story that the recruiters all completed the parenting program, ask them to explain how that works).

Example: So, you aim for program graduates to attend recruitment events? Are they part of your staff or do they join your staff recruiters for specific events? How do you organize this ahead of time? What happens after?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Why do you [*fill in practice*]? What is the rationale behind your approach?

Example: Why is it a priority for the team to include program graduates in recruiting efforts? What difference do you think it makes?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Other staff/sites have shared that they have experienced [*fill in example]* barriers: **Have you experienced these barriers? Why or why not?**

Example: We've heard from other sites that transportation is often a barrier to including program graduates in outreach. Have you experienced that challenge? Why or why not? How have you overcome it?

Click or tap here to enter text.

> **Tip:** If uncovering a sitewide practice, interview multiple staff at the bright spot site to gather different perspectives. Listen for patterns. Pay attention to factors like personnel used, specific policies and principles that guide staff's work, and tools or technology that might enhance or facilitate a process.

> **Tip:** Keep in mind that bright spots might be a collection of small things, rather than one major difference (*e.g., we always start a recruitment pitch with an open-ended question to get them talking first*). Keep probing on each step in a process.

Output from interviews

Go through the interview notes to identify patterns and themes. The key is to document the success factors that make the bright spots' approach different from the already-documented business-as-usual approach. Be clear about how to implement the success factors; for example, how to overcome barriers.

Example: Practice – ask fathers who graduated from your parenting programming to attend recruiting events. When attending recruiting events, be sure to bring at least one program graduate. Recruitment of fathers appears to be enhanced with the perspective of other fathers who have completed the program, even if the program graduate is not an experienced recruiter. When approaching fathers, have the program graduate kick-off the contact.