Using COM-B to support improvement

Program improvement involves asking people to do things differently, which can be challenging. CQI efforts could fail if those charged with carrying them out can't or don't want to implement them. COM-B is a framework for understanding human behavior and can be a useful tool in your team's efforts to design and implement improvement strategies.

COM-B (Figure 1) is based on decades of research on how to change people's behavior. For people to change their behavior, they must have the capability, opportunity, and motivation to do so.

Capability. An individual's psychological and physical capacity to engage in the activity. This includes having the necessary **knowledge** and **skills**.

Opportunity. The factors that lie outside of the individual that make the behavior possible or prompt it. This includes **environmental context**, **resources**, and **social influences**, such as peer influence or competing responsibilities.

Figure 1

Motivation. The brain processes that energize and direct behavior, not just goals and decision-making. Motivation is influenced by feelings of **self-efficacy**, **optimism** that things will go well, **beliefs about consequences** of action or inaction, alignment with **goals**, **emotional reactions**, and the ability to **connect actions and outcomes**.

Capability, opportunity, and motivation interact to influence behavior change. As represented in Figure 1, capability and opportunity can influence behavior directly, or can influence behavior through motivation. For example, a staff member who doesn't know how to engage potential participants and assess their interest and fit for your program may also feel less motivated to recruit new participants.
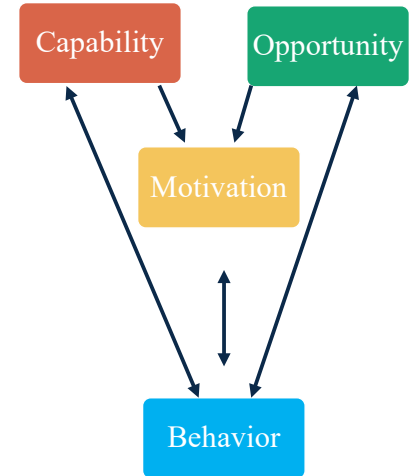
How to use COM-B

The COM-B framework can be a useful tool at different points in the strategy development process.

- **Informing improvement strategies**: Use the COM-B framework to help identify the root causes of your challenges, which can help you design targeted strategies to improve the implementation of your program.

- **Supporting strategy implementation**: Improvement strategies require people to do something differently than they have in the past. Using the COM-B framework can help to think through how to support users – oftentimes, staff – to change the way they do things.

Informing improvement strategies

Programmatic challenges are often rooted in an inability to influence client or staff behavior to engage with the program as designed. COM-B provides a framework for identifying root causes that prevent behavior change in order to support progress toward goals.

> **Example 1:** Connecting 2gether is an adult couples program. In addition to participating in weekly workshop sessions, the program expects all couples to participate in weekly one-on-one sessions with coaches to practice skills learned in class. Couples are expected to sign up using an online scheduler week to week. However, the program notices that only half of the couples regularly sign up for and participate in the weekly coaching sessions.

Understanding that behaviors are influenced by capability, opportunity, and motivation can help your team identify root causes. In Example 1, by talking to couples to identify their barriers to behavior change, Connecting 2gether can design appropriate strategies to target those barriers.

Capability: Do the couples understand how to use the online scheduler or is the scheduler overly complex? (Knowledge/skills)

→ Connecting 2gether could explore a simpler sign up process if couples are having trouble navigating the online system. For example, at the beginning of the workshop, coaches can schedule the weekly coaching sessions in advance at times that are convenient for the couples to eliminate the need for weekly scheduling.

Opportunity: Are the sessions held at convenient times? (Environmental context) Do other couples in the class talk about attending the sessions? (Social influences)

→ Ask couples to indicate their availability and ensure they are assigned to a coach who can accommodate their preferred times.

→ Identify a couple to champion the sessions by sharing with others what they get out of them.

Motivation: Do couples feel confident that the session will be a valuable use of time? (Optimism)

→ Coaches can send follow-up text messages about the benefits of coaching to motivate and remind participants to sign up and attend coaching sessions.

Supporting strategy implementation

Learning about challenges is the first step in designing effective strategies for your improvement goal. A second key step is ensuring that you are supporting those responsible for implementing the strategy. New strategies often require staff, clients, or partners to do something different. Before road testing a new improvement strategy, anticipate potential barriers to change and design supports to get ahead of them.

> **Example 2:** Leadership in the Connecting 2gether program are focused on improving recruitment of new clients. To get a better handle on promising outreach methods, program leaders ask staff to track their efforts in a new recruitment tracker spreadsheet. After a few weeks, however, they realize that staff are not consistently using the tracker to note their efforts. Staff entered data regularly during the first week but then most dropped off to the point where only a couple of staff were still using the tracker after a few weeks.

In Example 2, leadership can talk to staff to understand what will help them complete the tracker.

Capability: Do staff understand how to use the tracker? (Knowledge)

→ Offer a tip sheet that reviews the information staff are expected to record, where it should be recorded, and by whom. Emphasize that staff should reference the tip sheet when using the tracker.

Opportunity: Do staff have time to complete the tracker? (Environmental context)

→ Emphasize to staff the time saving benefits of updating the tracker after each interaction with a potential recruit so the tracker updates don't pile up and become overwhelming.

Motivation: Do staff see value in the tracker?

→ Ensure you're sharing the recruitment data back with staff at regular intervals to demonstrate how examining trends from the recruitment data can help them be more effective in their outreach efforts.

Using COM-B in practice

To identify barriers related to capability, opportunity, and motivation, you could facilitate a design activity with your CQI team or a broader group of staff following the decision matrix example below. Consider conducting empathy interviews with a small number of clients or staff experiencing the challenge to understand their barriers. Empathy interviews are brief, unstructured conversations to learn more about user experiences. You can learn more about decision matrices and empathy interviews in the HMRF CQI strategy brief.

A design activity to identify barriers and facilitators to behavior change

While strategy development often focuses on pinpointing and overcoming barriers, identifying facilitators can also help your team by identifying resources and strengths that support implementation of strategies.

Your team can use a design activity with staff to brainstorm facilitators and barriers to change. To structure the activity, design a 3X2 decision matrix using poster paper and sticky notes or a virtual whiteboard program (Mural, Miro). Label the rows as capability, opportunity, and motivation. Label the column headers as facilitators and barriers.

	Facilitators (what can support implementation?)	**Barriers** (what is getting in the way of implementation?)
Capability		Staff aren't sure how to use the tracker
Opportunity	Other programs at the agency are already tracking this data	Staff are already asked to track a lot of other data
Motivation	Staff agree that recruitment is a challenge	

Give staff 3 minutes to brainstorm facilitators across each category – capability, opportunity, motivation – and then another 3 minutes to brainstorm barriers. As staff are brainstorming, group similar stickies. Provide staff with time to read and reflect on the stickies and vote on the most significant barriers and facilitators. Select 2 to 3 of the stickies with the most votes and brainstorm ideas to address barriers and leverage facilitators, keeping in mind whether it's related to capability, opportunity, or motivation. The value in this activity is that it helps you select a strategy that is aligned with the factor preventing change, while leveraging facilitators. For example, if staff aren't entering data into your recruitment spreadsheet, your first inclination might be to offer a refresher training on how to use the spreadsheet. But if you identify the primary barrier is a lack of time, your strategy should address that issue while leveraging their motivation to use data to help overcome recruitment challenges.