

# Innovation *insights*

OFFICE OF PLANNING AND  
Institutional Assessment

Innovation Insight Series Number 3  
<http://www.psu.edu/president/pia/innovation/>

## Fast Track to Process Simplification

Are you looking for a faster way to make long-lasting improvements in your unit? Do you want to simplify a process to reduce its time and costs? Are you planning to use technology to automate a process? Do you want to give your customers access to self-service on the Web? The Fast Track approach can help you meet these goals.

### What is Fast Track Improvement?

Since 1991, a substantial number of faculty, staff, and students at Penn State have been involved in innovative efforts to design, redesign, and improve processes to enhance effectiveness and efficiency. Some of their stories are highlighted on the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment web site at <http://www.psu.edu/president/pia>. Many teams have effectively implemented process improvements over the years, and there continues to be an interest in strengthening the capacity for leadership, innovation and improvement at Penn State in order to increase our responsiveness to changing stakeholder needs.

The Fast Track approach was developed to address the opportunity to continually improve the improvement process itself and to help ensure successful implementation of high impact projects. The model is adapted from the Fast Cycle Change model developed by Dr. Ian Hau (1997), which substantially reduces the amount of time required to complete a process improvement/redesign project by anticipating implementation needs, completing tasks in parallel, eliminating time delays, and reducing the amount of review and repetition that occurs when teams meet infrequently over several months.

Hau has demonstrated that short project duration and high impact actually go together (1997). He describes four principles that help ensure project success:

1) articulate the desired impact when planning the project; 2) focus on the transition when assembling the team and designing process changes; 3) keep process changes simple, with three to six features; and 4) focus on the process of assembling “knowledge parts” rather than the parts themselves.

He recommends actually mocking up the completion report when formulating the project as an effective way to help visualize what the team aims to accomplish and to identify the gap between the current and ideal processes. He also notes that to maximize ownership for implementation, it is crucial to choose team members from among those that will be implementing the change.

Using the Fast Track approach, a team can quickly streamline a process and implement improvements that will last. Teams identify and reduce inefficiencies like bottlenecks, rework and other time delays. They reduce complexities that result when several people handle the same task, or when there are unnecessary layers of approval. They look for opportunities to perform activities in parallel and other sequence changes that will simplify processes. They attempt to eliminate overlapping paper and electronic processing.

Much of the Fast Track project is completed outside team meetings, saving valuable team time for the work of the actual redesign. The total project, from project approval to demonstration of impact, will be completed within 17-22 weeks with only a fraction of that time used for team meetings. Following the project

close, the process owner will continue to monitor performance measures.

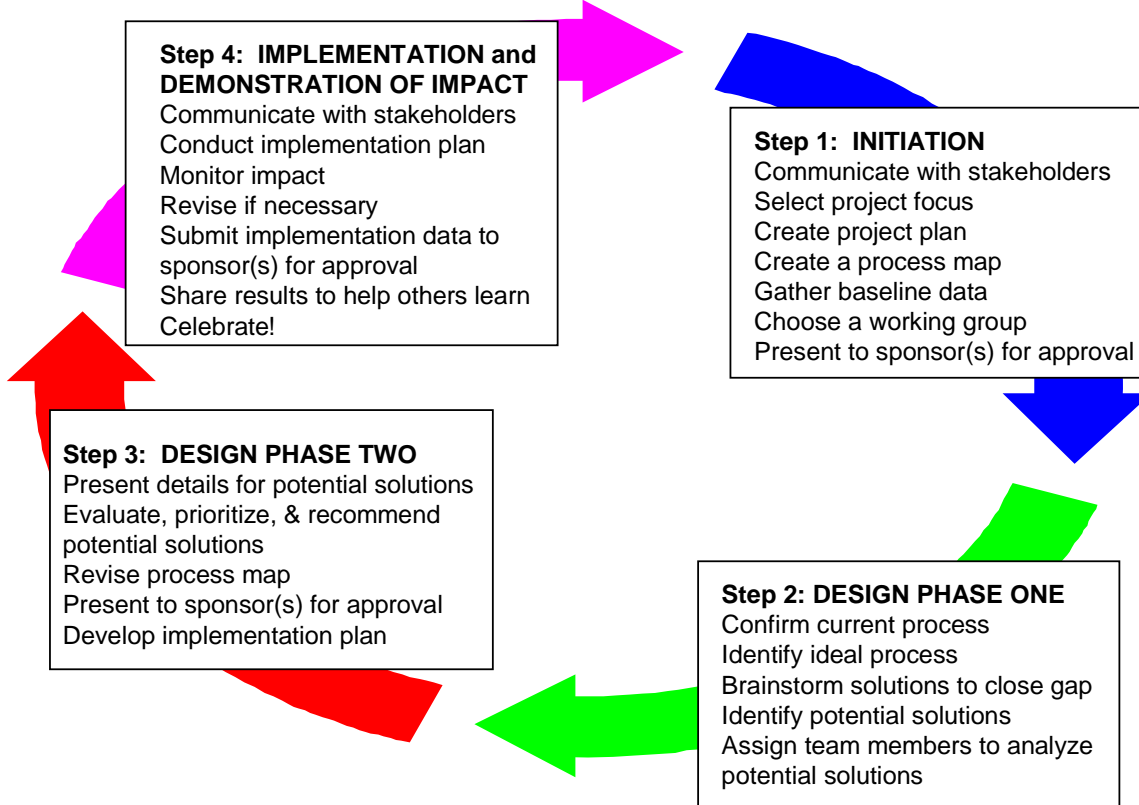
### From Initiation to Demonstration of Impact

Step one, **Initiation**, should be completed within four to five weeks, with the majority of work in this phase done by the team leader and facilitator. It is crucial to choose a project that is important to stakeholders and is expected to achieve high impact. It is also important to choose team members from among those that will be implementing the project to ensure widespread participation and ownership. The initiation step has a significant impact on the successful implementation of solutions.

Steps two and three, **Design Phase One and Two**, are typically completed within three weeks after the completion of step one. A team will often schedule a day-long meeting for each of the design phases, with a week between meetings to analyze potential solutions. All team members do work in these steps.

Step four, **Implementation and Demonstration of Impact**, should be completed within 11-15 weeks. The work in this step should be coordinated by the team leader and conducted by all team members. The team leader should communicate regularly with those conducting the implementation, and should schedule short project review meetings if appropriate. At the end of this step, data on the impact of the redesigned processes should be submitted to team sponsor(s).

## Fast Track Improvement Model



OUTREACH COMMUNICATIONS used the Fast Track approach to redesign the Outreach Magazine production process. They were able to increase their publication schedule to add an additional issue. “The CQI Fast Track approach provided a flexible and time efficient way to streamline our Outreach Magazine production process. We assembled our team from several Outreach Units and we had multiple responsibilities to manage and tight deadlines to meet. This approach enabled us to meet our deadlines for production of the magazine and improve our processes simultaneously. It has been two years since we implemented the CQI approach and we continue to examine our processes and apply the guiding principles to our work. The Fast Track approach was perfect for our team!”

-Tracey Huston, Director of Outreach Communications,  
Outreach & Cooperative Extension

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES’ MEDIA & TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT SERVICES used the Fast Track approach to reduce errors. “The Fast Track was definitely the best approach for our group. Media & Technology Support Services has 34 full-time employees, including 21 technical service employees. Since we are a service group, it is extremely difficult to schedule group meetings during fall and spring semesters. By using the Fast Track method, we were able to meet a minimum number of times to get to the heart of our issues and concerns. The leadership provided by the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment led to efficiently organized sessions.”

-William Bishop, Media & Technology  
Support Services, University Libraries

PENN STATE ALTOONA used the Fast Track approach to redesign the process used to inform students of faculty course cancellations. “I was especially pleased with the Fast Track process. I am usually interested in solving an identified problem as quickly as possible; this process provides the opportunity to do so. I realize that Fast Track is not appropriate for all issues/problems that one needs to address, but I would use it as much as possible. I believe that the team members who worked on our Fast Track project were also pleased. They felt a true sense of accomplishment, and were particularly pleased that they could identify the problem, draft potential solution(s), and have those solution(s) implemented in a relatively short time frame.”

-Richard K. Shaffer, Director of  
Admissions and Enrollment Services,  
Penn State Altoona

OUTREACH MARKETING used the Fast Track approach to reduce by over 50% the time it takes them to produce print publications. “I would have to say that Fast Track was probably the best approach for our team because we are accustomed to working in a fast-paced environment, and expect visible results within a short time. Had we taken the more traditional, long-term approach, the team would have burned out. Also, we were fortunate that we already had the data to show what was actually happening, so we didn’t need to spend time collecting and analyzing it. If there is a negative aspect to Fast Track it is this: The change effort does not build up a lot of momentum, so it is easy to experience a drop in energy and motivation. You really have to have a strong driver to keep things moving once you’re in the implementation phase.”

-Angela Rogers, Senior Marketing Associate, Outreach & Cooperative Extension

## Additional Resources

Baldrige National Quality Program. (current year).  
*Education Criteria for Performance Excellence*.  
[www.quality.nist.gov](http://www.quality.nist.gov)

Brassard, M. and D. Ritter. (1994). *The Memory Jogger II*. Salem, NH: GOAL/QPC.

Hau, I. and F. Calhoun. (1997). *Fast Cycle Change in Knowledge-Based Organizations: Building Fundamental Capability for Implementing Strategic Transformation*. Center for Quality and Productivity Improvement Report No. 161, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI

Scholtes, P.R., B. Joiner, and B. Streibel. (2003). *The Team Handbook: How to Use Teams to Improve Quality* (3rd ed.). Madison, WI: Oriel Inc.

For more information, contact the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment at 814-863-8721 or [psupia@psu.edu](mailto:psupia@psu.edu), or visit our website at <http://www.psu.edu/president/pia>.

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