FROM VISION TO IMPACT

How the Blue Sky Possibilities Framework is Redefining Continuous Quality Improvement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many human services systems struggle to achieve durable change, not because their goals are unclear, but because relational and cultural conditions needed for transformation are never fully in place. Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) gives organizations the structure and processes for ongoing learning, yet research shows that CQI implemented in isolation is insufficient to produce sustainable change. When organizations prioritize compliance over genuine inquiry, improvement efforts stall at the surface and persistent inequities go unaddressed.

Chapin Hall's Blue Sky Possibilities Framework (BSP) addresses the gap between implementing CQI in isolation and achieving equitable, meaningful, sustainable change. Grounded in implementation science and relational systems research, BSP is a relational, community-centered framework that strengthens CQI by embedding trust, lived expertise, collective sense making, root cause inquiry, and community partnership into existing improvement infrastructure. Rather than functioning as a separate initiative, BSP is designed to be applied within CQI structures, deepening exploration, strengthening partnerships, elevating lived experience, and supporting more adaptive learning.

Using flight as a central metaphor, this brief frames systems change as a journey requiring operational readiness, a capable crew, and the right conditions for takeoff. It identifies the common barriers that keep systems grounded, including low relational trust, limited decision-making power for people with lived experience, compliance-driven cultures, fragmented CQI practices, and innovation constrained by administrative feasibility. It then describes eight core BSP elements and shows how each can be operationalized within CQI components. The brief closes with a call to action for human services leaders.

This brief is the first in a series. A forthcoming brief will focus on practical tools, strategies, and real-world examples for applying BSP-informed CQI.

A NOTE BEFORE YOU TAKE OFF: PRE-FLIGHT OVERVIEW

Orienting to BSP Framework and CQI

What is the Blue Sky Possibilities Framework?

The Blue Sky Possibilities Framework (BSP) is a relational and community-centered framework grounded in implementation science and relational systems research. BSP emphasizes trust, lived expertise, collective sensemaking, root cause analysis, and community partnership as conditions that may support learning, adaptation, and systems.

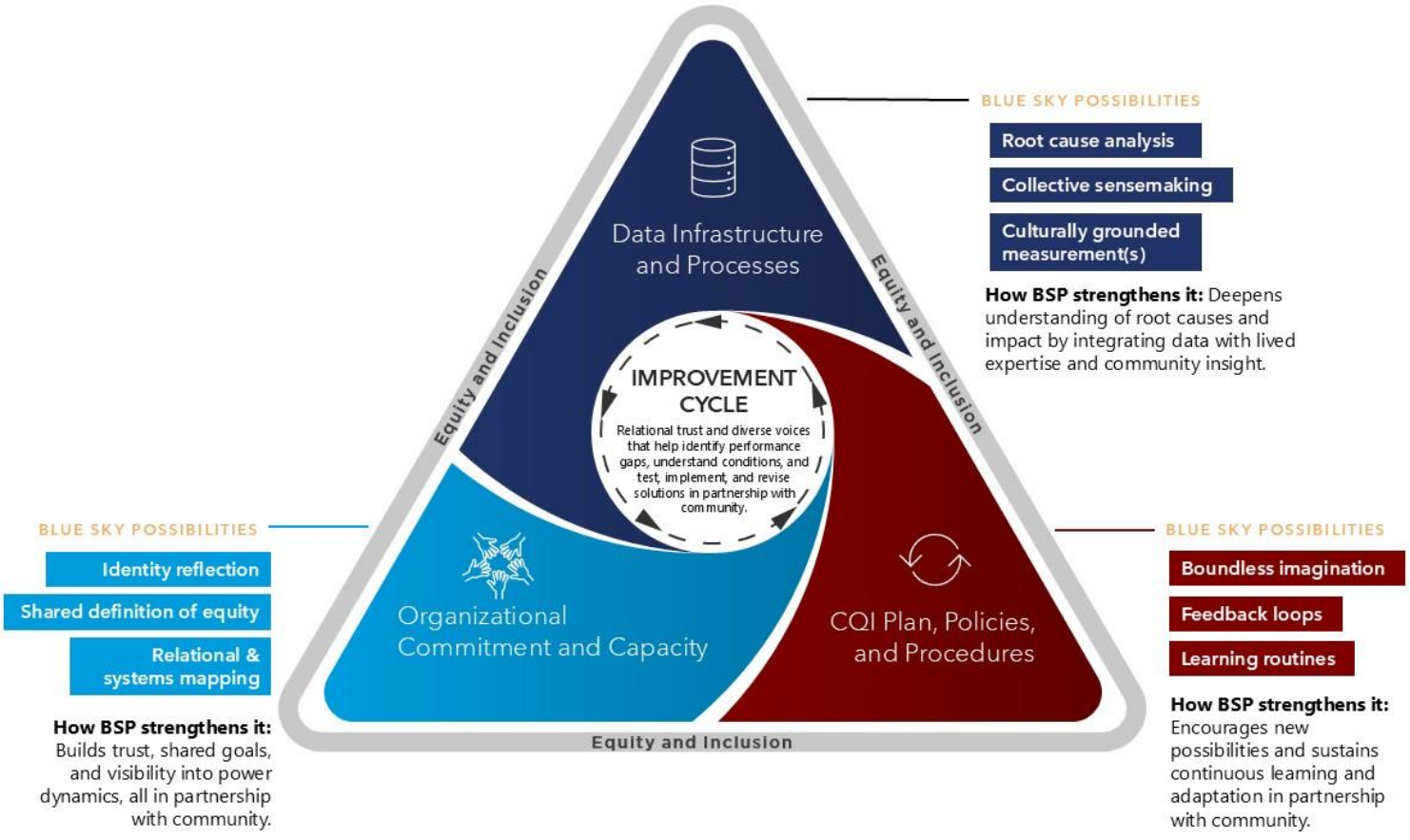
Why BSP and CQI?

This brief explores one application of BSP: strengthening continuous quality improvement (CQI). While CQI provides the structure and processes for continuous learning and improvement, BSP offers a relational and community-centered lens that may help organizations deepen inquiry, strengthen partnerships, elevate lived experience, and support more adaptive learning environments.

Applying BSP Within CQI Infrastructure

Table 1 provides an illustration of how BSP core elements may be applied within existing CQI infrastructure. Examples are illustrative rather than prescriptive.

Table 1. Blue Sky Possibilities Elements Mapped to Core CQI Infrastructure



A LENS FOR RELATIONAL SYSTEMS CHANGE: DEFINING YOUR BLUE SKY

What becomes possible?

Blue Sky Possibilities Framework (BSP) is a relational and community-centered framework designed to strengthen CQI by building the conditions necessary for learning, adaptation, and systems transformation.



Think about the last time you were a passenger on an airplane. Perhaps you sat on the taxiway for hours, ready to take off, only to wait. No explanation for the delay. Or maybe you've experienced the unsettling feeling of circling above your destination, so close yet the plane is unable to land due to poor weather conditions. Think about the frustration of waiting, watching the clock, wondering "when" things would change, and hoping someone in the cockpit had a plan.

For too many human services systems ("human services"), the plane never lands. Not because the destination is unclear. Rather, no one has asked whether the conditions for takeoff were ever truly in place.

Systems change can feel abstract, technical, and overwhelming. Like preparing for a flight, transforming human services requires checking operational readiness, anticipating turbulence due to inclement weather, trusting your crew, and building the conditions that allow systems to finally leave the runway and reach new altitudes. Many human services operate within narrow, familiar airspace, flying low and staying within perceived limits of administrative safety. This restricts innovation and prevents teams from exploring expansive "blue sky," where imagination, community partnership, and transformation reside.

Sustainable systems transformation requires more than technical solutions, compliance structures, or performance metrics alone (Heifetz et al., 2009; Bryk et al., 2015; Metz et al., 2021). It requires relational trust, shared meaning making, reflective learning, and community-centered approaches that strengthen how systems understand and respond to complex challenges. At the center of this flight plan is continuous quality improvement (CQI), not as a compliance tool, but as the navigation system that keeps systems learning, adapting, and moving toward equitable outcomes.

Chapin Hall's (2023) **Blue Sky Possibilities Framework** (BSP) serves as the flight plan, the relational and community-centered conditions that determine whether the navigation system (i.e. human services) can function at all. Grounded in implementation science and relational systems research, BSP is designed to strengthen CQI by embedding trust, shared meaning, and community voice required to guide human services leaders toward equitable and sustainable outcomes for children, families, and communities.

OPERATIONAL READINESS: WHY SYSTEMS NEED A NEW FLIGHT PLAN FOR CHANGE

Research affirms that meaningful change requires expanding what systems believe is possible and equipping organizations with the relationships, navigation tools, and learning routines that allow them to travel beyond the status quo (Heifetz et al., 2009; Kania et al., 2014). To understand why a new flight plan is needed, it is essential to examine the conditions that continue to hinder progress.

CQI is a foundational infrastructure for learning and iteration, yet research consistently demonstrates that CQI processes, when implemented in isolation, are insufficient to produce sustainable change (Metz et al., 2021; Bryk et al., 2015). When organizations prioritize compliance over substantive inquiry into the conditions driving persistent inequities, improvement efforts stall at the surface. A system that assigns blame at the individual staff level rather than using root cause analysis to uncover system breakdowns is not yet operationally ready for transformation. Instead, it is simply managing the symptoms of the issues. True operational readiness demands that human services leaders develop the capacity to look deeper into what's getting in the way, to identify not just what went wrong, but why the conditions that allowed it persisted.

Operational readiness also requires organizations to create the relational and cultural conditions necessary for continuous learning. Without trust, psychological safety, and shared understanding across system partners, improvement efforts often remain procedural rather than transformational.

Centering Relationships in Systems Change

Operational readiness is about putting the right conditions in place so that genuine, ongoing learning can happen through strong relationships.



Equally foundational to operational readiness is the quality of relationships within and across systems. Low relational trust between state agencies, community-based organizations, service providers, communities, and individuals with lived experience interacting with these systems creates invisible ceilings on the success of improvement efforts (Glisson, 2015). When historical harm, power imbalances, and structural inequities shape who gets to speak, whose data is shared, and whose voice informs decisions, even well-designed CQI processes can reproduce the very inequities that they are attempting to address (Khan & Moore, 2023). The BSP Framework responds directly to this gap, integrating the analytical rigor of CQI with intentional relationship building, root cause inquiry, and community- and person-centered co-design. Before any human services leader can chart a new flight plan, they must first assess whether their crew, the plane's mechanical structure, navigational instruments, and the conditions on the ground are genuinely ready for takeoff.

WHERE TRADITIONAL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS STALL AND WHY CQI ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

What Keeps Systems Stuck in Same Patterns?

Low relational trust, leaving lived experience out of decisions, and fragmented cultures prevent systems from reaching their goals. patterns.



Despite decades of reform efforts, and as mentioned earlier in this brief, many human services organizations continue to face difficulties such as persistent inequities, fragmented practice, and inconsistent outcomes (Metz et al., 2021; Bryk et al., 2015). Low relational trust, limited collaborative decision-making with lived experts, compliance-focused cultures, and fragmented CQI practices can create inclement weather conditions that may keep systems grounded.

Persistent barriers include:

- **Low relational trust** across organizations, providers, and communities limits honest data sharing and weakens CQI learning cycles (Glisson, 2015).
    - Historical harm, structural, power, and social dynamics influence trust and a willingness to engage fully (Khan & Moore, 2023). For example, an agency may withhold data from lived experts or communities due to concerns about misinterpretation or reduced trust and confidence in the information (Kimberly & Green-Rogers, 2025).
- **Limited decision-making power** for individuals with lived experience (Powell & Menendian, 2016).
    - Honoring lived experience requires redistributing power and shared decision making (Pogany et al., 2025; Coles & Murphy, 2023; Loughhead et al., 2024). For example, organizations may seek feedback from a lived expert after a test of change was implemented rather than when the problem or change was conceptualized.
- **Compliance-driven cultures** that prioritize process rather than curiosity or learning (Dekker, 2012; Metz et al., 2021).
    - Cultures driven by compliance are often process oriented. For example, organizations may have routines in place for analyzing data but may assign blame at the individual staff level rather than using root cause analyses to uncover systemic breakdowns (Dekker, 2012).
- **Fragmented CQI practices** lack shared meaning and psychological safety (Bryk et al., 2015).
    - While discomfort and challenges are expected to occur in continuous improvement efforts, systems may lack a proactive, trauma-informed approach to responding (VanMeeter et al., 2025). For example, organizations may not openly discuss mistakes or have psychologically safe methods for staff to report issues.
- **Innovation constrained by administrative feasibility** instead of community need (Brown & Wyatt, 2010).
    - Human services often operate with limited resources and must balance a variety of demands. This makes it more difficult to spend additional time exploring, testing, and iterating solutions, particularly alongside community (Brown & Wyatt, 2010). For example, they may opt to implement a program that appears easiest for their jurisdiction to replicate. However, upon implementation, they may discover the chosen solution will not work well in their community.

The Blue Sky Possibilities Framework cultivates the psychological safety and emotional trust necessary for CQI to function as an authentic learning system.



These challenges demonstrate why technical solutions, new programs, policies, and performance metrics cannot, on their own, generate the cultural shift required for durable systems change (Heifetz et al., 2009). For human services, improvement must be both structural and relational. It must be grounded in the people, partnerships, and communities that bring policy to life (see Chapin Hall's previously published CQI briefs for more on this).

Overcoming these challenges requires a more community-centered, relational approach, one that readies systems by grounding them in identity, trust, and imagination. When CQI is paired with relational-trust building, community-centered facilitation, and shared meaning making, human services systems are better positioned to further improve while remaining grounded in evidence, equity, and shared purpose.

The Flight Path

to Systems Transformation



SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Centering people, expanding possibility, and strengthening CQI together reach new altitudes toward equitable, sustainable outcomes for children and families.

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

CQI serves as a compass rather than a destination, aligning leadership, data, and improvement cycles so that change spreads through relationships rather than memos.

POSSIBILITY

Blue Sky represents the imagination beyond compliance-driven habits, requiring leaders to name the barriers that keep systems grounded before expanding what is possible.

PEOPLE

Staff, lived experts, and community partners form the flight crew whose relational trust gives CQI its lift, while the manifest reveals who is on board and who is left behind.

CHARTING A NEW FLIGHT PLAN: A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO CQI

The barriers described above are not resolved through technical or procedural fixes alone. They require a fundamentally different approach. This is where BSP strengthens CQI. By embedding relational and community-centered conditions directly into CQI infrastructure, BSP offers a framework for moving improvement beyond a procedural exercise toward a more adaptive, equity-driven learning system.

This transformation starts with those charged with its completion—from senior leaders who set the direction, to managers who support the work, to frontline staff, community partners, and lived experts who bring it to life. Every role matters, and systems achieve sustainable, people-centered transformation only when people are fully engaged in their roles.

The Flight Crew Matters: CQI and the People Engine of Human Services Systems

Human services thrive when the people within them feel connected to their values, one another, and the communities they serve. Implementation research consistently shows that relational trust, psychological safety, and shared purpose are among the strongest predictors of successful change (Aarons et al., 2014; Glisson, 2015).

Chapin Hall's BSP Framework puts these relational conditions into practice by intentionally centering identity, lived experience, and shared meaning as **prerequisites** for authentic, holistic, root-cause-driven inquiry to facilitate improvement (Chapin Hall, 2023). Through structured reflection, collaborative inquiry, and collective sensemaking, BSP is intended to cultivate the psychological safety and relational trust that research suggests are necessary for CQI to function as an authentic learning system rather than solely a compliance exercise. Instead, BSP strengthens CQI by helping organizations deepen reflective practice, surface implementation barriers, strengthen shared accountability, and build the relational conditions necessary for adaptive systems change.

Centering people through BSP-aligned practices strengthens CQI and organizational performance by:

- Elevating lived and proximate expertise in CQI-informed decision making.
- Improving cross-role communication and relational trust, enabling psychologically safe CQI learning cycles.
- Fostering shared leadership and collective accountability in improvement efforts.
- Building empathy and alignment across human services system partners and collaborators to support adaptive change.
- Strengthening readiness for ongoing, CQI-driven learning and iteration.

Chapin Hall's community engagement briefs (2022) highlight that relational trust and co-design are not add-ons to engagement; they are preconditions for durable systems transformation. When people are connected and grounded, human service workers become more capable of imagining possibilities beyond current constraints.

People are the engines that give CQI systems lift. BSP builds a strong engine by cultivating identity, trust, shared meaning, and imagination, conditions that allow CQI to move beyond technical problem-solving and support adaptive, community-centered change (Chapin Hall, 2023). Without these relational foundations, even the most robust CQI frameworks struggle to achieve transformational outcomes.

Checking the Manifest: Who's on Board the Flight?

Strong relationships help a flight crew work well together, but they only benefit those already on the plane. Before taking off, it is important to look closely at who is on board. In human services, the people already receiving support are not a random or fully representative group. They are actually individuals who had the time, resources, language skills, trust in the system, and social connections needed to get a ticket and board the plane (Capacity Building Center for States, 2022). Many who could benefit in receiving needed support never make it onto the plane due to barriers such as administrative complexity, bias, geographic isolation, and mistrust due to contemporary and historic systemic harm (Torres Rodríguez et al., 2022). Focusing improvement efforts only on the in-flight experience risks optimizing a system that continues to exclude those on the periphery. True improvement efforts require asking not just who cannot access services, but also what systemic conditions, structures, and historical dynamics make access difficult in the first place (Pogany et al., 2025).

Pre-Take Off Systems Check #1: A Community-Focused Relational Power-Building Approach

Durable system change depends on the human infrastructure that supports learning, adaptation, and innovation (Senge, 1990; Bryk et al., 2015). The BSP Framework is designed to strengthen CQI and systems-change efforts by helping organizations build the relational and organizational conditions necessary for adaptive learning, collaborative inquiry, and equitable systems transformation. The following BSP elements are presented through a CQI lens, highlighting the conditions and practices that can strengthen continuous learning, inquiry, and improvement.

Core Elements of the BSP Framework

The BSP Framework builds upon several core elements:

- **Identity reflection:** Deepening the understanding of lived experience, purpose, values, and perspective.
- **Shared definitions of equity:**[1] Building collective understanding grounded in community realities and experiences.
- **Boundless imagination exercises:** Creating space to envision aspirational futures beyond current constraints.
- **Root-cause analysis routines**: Exploring systemic drivers and structural conditions contributing to inequities.
- **Relational and systems mapping:** Illuminating power dynamics, relationships, and organizational conditions shaping practice.
- **Collective sensemaking:** Integrating data, stories, lived expertise, and community insight into learning processes.
- **Culturally grounded measurement:** Expanding the understanding of impact to include trust, belonging, agency, and community-defined indicators.
- **Feedback loops and learning routines:** Strengthening continuous learning, reflection, and CQI infrastructure.

[1] Equity is the intentional and continuous process of providing different levels of support to achieve fairness and justice in outcomes for individuals and groups, regardless of identities one holds. It acknowledges systemic imbalances and promotes changes in policies, procedures, resources, and structures to prioritize reducing disparities in the ways different identities and groups are treated (Adapted from Race Forward, n.d.; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2019; Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, n.d.).

The components above establish the foundational conditions for BSP. The following section describes how these foundational elements move from theory to practice, demonstrating how CQI becomes an actionable process developed in partnership with the community and lived experts, guided by BSP principles.

How CQI Becomes Actionable

Identity reflection. "Lived experience" refers to the firsthand knowledge and practical wisdom, including "trauma, success, beliefs, [and] biases," of those who have personal experience, directly or indirectly, with an agency or system, such as child welfare or human services (Loughhead et al., 2024; Coles & Murphy, 2023). As stated earlier, understanding and honoring lived experience requires a redistribution and balance of power, not tokenization, that rests with lived experts and their communities (Gaber, 2019; Arnstein, 1969).

CQI THROUGH A RELATION LENS

Conditions to Support Operationalizing BSP within CQI

- Identity reflection
- Shared definition of equity
- Boundless imagination exercises
- Root cause analysis processes
- Relational and systems mapping
- Collective sensemaking
- Culturally grounded measurements
- Feedback loops & learning routines

Equity is the intentional and continuous process of providing different levels of support to achieve fairness and justice in outcomes for individuals and groups regardless of identities one holds.

Shared definition of equity. Personal and professional experiences impact individual interpretations of equity. Individual, organizational, and community experiences shape how equity is understood and operationalized within systems. Developing shared language and understanding helps strengthen clarity, collaboration, and accountability throughout improvement efforts.

Boundless imagination exercises. Explore what the system and community could achieve without barriers or limits. If there were unlimited resources to support change, what would that look like? These exercises are not intended to ignore operational realities, but rather temporarily suspend limiting assumptions so organizations can identify possibilities, innovations, and community-defined aspirations that may otherwise remain unexplored.

Root-cause analysis processes. By using CQI root cause inquiry tools, such as the Five Why's, a root cause can be identified as being a primary driver of, or protecting against, structural inequities. Root cause analyses should consider different types and sources of knowledge (for example, combining lived experiences with formal research and evidence; see Khan & Moore, 2023). Identifying and understanding the root cause of challenges is essential to advancing a shared definition of equity and boundless aspirations.

Relational and systems mapping. This approach makes relationship features visible, including power dynamics, decision pathways, and structural conditions that shape how work actually happens within human services. Rather than focusing only on formal organizational structures, this practice helps systems understand how relationships, power dynamics, trust, policies, procedures, and informal norms collectively shape implementation experiences and outcomes. Within BSP, this approach is used to identify misalignment between intention and experience, surface root causes that are not visible in data alone, and clarify where relational power building is needed to support fair, CQI-informed change.

Collective sensemaking. Through the CQI process, collective sensemaking involves interpreting data in partnership with community, lived experts, and system partners. This authentic, people-centered approach moves away from performative design, which is when systems adopt the language of human-centered design without intentionally incorporating lived experience into decision making. (Bernabei, 2017). This potentially creates a disconnect between systemic expectations of impact, and the reality of what the community is experiencing.

Culturally grounded measurement. This may require CQI measurement frameworks to include "non-traditional" metrics such as social capital, community engagement, or family agency (also known as self-determination). This measurement promotes transparency, trust, and belonging through accountability and accessibility.

Feedback loops and learning routines. To support this relational systems approach, CQI staff need to build internal infrastructure that includes accountability and relational trust. Organizations should consider how impact will be documented, evaluated, communicated, and continuously refined in partnership with community and lived experts. This includes whether the anticipated outcomes are being achieved and how the system will continue to deepen relationships with communities and lived experts to ensure the work is effective and sustainable (Nelson & Brooks, 2016).

Together, these elements allow human service leaders to move intentionally beyond status quo while staying grounded in evidence, equity, and shared purpose. With these foundational conditions in place, systems can elevate the most critical element of improvement: the people who make the work possible.

Pre-Take Off Systems Check #2: Operational Alignment with Core CQI Components

With the relational conditions in place, human services systems can align leadership, data, and improvement functions so teams can navigate complexity with clarity and shared purpose. During this phase, trusted technical assistance partners, such as Chapin Hall, serve as integral members of the broader flight crew to support implementation of BSP principles into CQI. We help to calibrate systems, bridge strategy to real-world practice, and foster ongoing alignment throughout all levels of the system.

Actively applying BSP principles can make CQI more community focused and relational, offering the potential to strengthen each core element identified in Chapin Hall's CQI briefs (Kimberly & Green-Rogers, 2025; Wulczyn et al., 2014) and other improvement research. BSP should not function separately from CQI. Rather, BSP should be intentionally incorporated within existing CQI infrastructure to enhance the relational and collaborative practices necessary for continuous and adaptive implementation through:

- Incorporating community and lived experts into existing leadership & governance teaming structures. Including community and lived experts fosters enhanced clarity, alignment, and a shared sense of purpose, ensuring that system-wide decisions are cohesive and vision-driven.
- Developing teaming environments that address power dynamics between agency staff and community as part of organizational readiness. Doing so cultivates an environment of psychological safety and a culture of continuous learning, empowering teams to embrace change and adapt effectively.
- Incorporating standard processes that encourage co-design with community and lived experts. Prioritize the integration of lived experience in co-design by creating standard processes or expectations for their involvement in exploring improvement strategies to address systems challenges. This ensures that solutions are informed by those most impacted.
- Improving learning through humanizing data and connecting it to lived experience and real interactions with our systems. Community stories deepen contextual interpretation and validate quantitative data, generate actionable insights, and support evidence-informed decision making. This is an integral part of root cause analysis for relational systems change.
- Including community interpretation in root cause analysis—how do their stories uncover underlying causes of systems barriers? Root cause analysis is only effective when an organization is committed to fully understanding and embracing what is getting in the way. Quantitative data is only a part of the story. It must be connected to qualitative insights from lived experiences to reveal systems' inabilities to meet true needs of people they serve. This uncovers and addresses the structural drivers of inequity, enabling targeted and sustained improvements.
- Integrating lived experts into the CQI cycle of learning and improvement. Integrating lived experts makes learning and improvement more effective. Their involvement enhances the process of iterative testing, adapting, and continuously refining efforts to better meet community needs.
- Building communication feedback loops that elevate staff and the community voice and facilitates real-time progress updates. Intentionally building feedback loops that elevate staff and community input exemplifies a person-centered approach. This process transforms how organizations learn, prioritize community-defined measures, and make real-time corrections with collective accountability—key elements of CQI.
- *Establishing accountability mechanisms of how the organization partners with the community in systems-change efforts.* This goes beyond an invitation for the community to share their insights in an advisory capacity only. Organizations should establish oversight structures to ensure staff and leaders truly include community and lived experts in system change efforts. This means using relational and cultural indicators to monitor implementation progress. Success should be measured not only by performance outcomes, but also by the ability to establish trust, equity, and belonging.

When organizations embed these components together, they create the necessary connections for real, sustainable progress. Once the structure and tools are in place, the critical step is ensuring everyone involved is ready and empowered to act. True systems change happens when people believe in the possibility of change and feel confident in their ability to make it happen.

Systems develop the interdependencies required to reach new horizons. With leadership aligned and structures in place, the next question is whether the staff are prepared to move. Systems only succeed when individuals believe change is possible and feel equipped to act.

EXPANDING WHAT SYSTEMS BELIEVE IS POSSIBLE

Adaptive systems change requires more than technical tools. It requires organizations to believe change is possible and to create space for new ways of thinking, learning, and designing solutions alongside community. *Boundless imagination* is essential for adaptive change. Human services often narrow their range of solutions to what feels manageable within current processes or funding structures. Research on innovation, design, and adaptive leadership shows that progress accelerates when teams challenge these constraints and envision new, community-guided futures (Metz et al., 2021; Heifetz et al., 2009; Fixsen et al., 2005; Rogers, 2003).

Possibility-centered work encourages human services leaders, practitioners, and communities to move beyond existing constraints and collaboratively reimagine what equitable, community-centered systems could become. It invites leaders, practitioners, and communities to co-create new approaches that prioritize equity, partnership, and transformational outcomes.

Possibility-centered work enables teams to:

- Name aspirations that reflect community hopes for thriving families
- Challenge limiting assumptions that restrict innovation
- Identify opposing forces and structural headwinds beyond the team's control
- Recognize emerging opportunities and underutilized strengths
- Shift from reactive to generative system design

When systems improve through imagination, they expand their capacity to innovate in ways aligned with community-defined outcomes. Once new horizons are in view, systems need strong navigational tools to chart a steady course toward them, tools found in continuous improvement.

Understanding the Conditions: Continuous Improvement as the System's Compass

As systems make progress toward their goals, CQI serves as the navigational system, helping teams stay oriented, adjust course, and maintain momentum as conditions change. In human services, CQI is more than performance measurement; it is a relational, adaptive, and continuous learning process that helps organizations make sense of complexity, test changes, and refine practice over time. CQI is most effective when supported by relational trust, collaborative routines, and shared learning cultures (Bryk et al., 2015; Park et al., 2013).

A community-focused, relational approach strengthens CQI by:

- grounding data interpretation in lived experience and context,
- supporting collaborative inquiry across roles and sectors,
- identifying small, actionable wins that build momentum,
- establishing feedback loops that include family and community perspectives,
- modeling psychological safety for honest problem identification, and
- embedding reflective routines that sustain learning over time.

This relational approach to strengthening CQI directly aligns with Chapin Hall's CQI guidance, which emphasizes that improvement requires both technical tools and relational conditions (Kimberly & Green-Rogers, 2025). With navigation tools in place, the next question is how change spreads. Research shows that improvement travels through relationships, spreading through trusted networks, rather than memoranda (Rogers, 2003; Christakis & Fowler, 2012; Centola, 2018). Early adopters play a critical role by modeling new practices, reinforcing a culture of CQI, and accelerating change (Greenhalgh et al., 2004).

Acceleration & Takeoff: Building Momentum Through Relationships

Sustainable systems change rarely occurs through policies, technical guidance, or organizational directives alone.

Change in a human services system is similar to a plane accelerating, down the runway, takeoff is not achieved by a single action but by the steady buildup of speed, team alignment and agreement, and a shared sense of direction. The support of air traffic controllers and the ground crew shape the conditions needed for safe departure. The aircraft gains momentum as different components work together, engines providing thrust, instruments guiding direction, and the crew coordinating in real time, until flight becomes possible.
The foundation of Chapin Hall's BSP Framework lies within social contagion theory, which explains how change accelerates once it begins to move through trusted relationships (Centola, 2018; Christakis & Fowler, 2012). As noted in the preceding section, early adopters act as credible influences by modeling new behaviors and practices that feel feasible and relevant within their local context. As these practices are observed, tested, and reinforced through everyday interactions, momentum builds across teams and networks, shifting norms, strengthening shared meaning, and reinforcing a people-centered culture of CQI.

Relationships move change forward by:

- identifying credible influencers who model desired practices,
- sharing narratives that make change feel tangible and real,
- reinforcing cultural norms through relational networks,
- supporting adoption through peer alignment and shared meaning, and
- creating momentum for broader systems transformation.

Understanding how change spreads illustrates why relational power is essential for each part of a strong CQI system. Relational skills are not optional in systems -work—they are necessary to drive improvement. Applying this knowledge helps organizations assess their progress on the journey to sustainable systems change.

Reaching New Altitudes: A Path Forward

Human service systems seeking to advance child and family well-being need more than new programs or process-focused adjustments; they need a new plan grounded in relationship, imagination, and continuous learning. BSP is designed to ground a community-centered, relational approach within CQI infrastructure, with the intent of creating the conditions necessary for navigating uncertainty, strengthening trust, and supporting equitable systems transformation. By centering people, expanding possibilities, and strengthening continuous improvement, systems are better equipped to reach new altitudes in child and family well-being.

CALL TO ACTION FOR HUMAN SERVICE LEADERS

For human services leaders, this moment calls for courageous leadership that moves beyond managing complexity towards reimagining what systems can become. Charting new skies requires leaders to act as architects of possibility, not as stewards of compliance.

We invite human service leaders to take three immediate actions:

1. **Lead with relational courage.** Create space for trust-building, shared learning, and co-design with families, lived experts, and frontline staff. Model vulnerability, curiosity and reflection to strengthen psychological safety and foster collective ownership of change. Understand that relationships are one of the main ingredients for successful, high functioning functional teams (Wilson, 2024).
2. **Redesign improvement through a CQI + BSP lens.** Shift CQI from primarily compliance-oriented function toward a relational learning process that integrates data, lived expertise, reflective inquiry, and community-centered sensemaking. Use CQI routines to monitor performance and surface any structural barriers, test innovations, and elevate community-defined success.
3. **Expand what your system believes is possible.** A system will only go as far as their leader takes them. Therefore, challenge limiting assumptions about funding, policy, and operations by engaging in boundless imagination. Invite community partners and families to help define bold aspirations and shape future-state design that centers dignity, belonging, and equity.

What Leaders Must Do

- Set direction (vision + values)
- Build relational trust
- Center lived experience
- Cultivate psychological safety
- Align CQI with equity

"Leadership Determines Altitude"



The new flight plan does not replace technical rigor—it deepens it by embedding relational trust, shared meaning, and community voice into the very fabric of system design. When leaders align vision, people and continuous learning, they generate the lift required to reach new horizons in child and family well-being.

WHAT'S NEXT: FROM VISION TO FLIGHT PATH

This brief provides the introductory case for a new flight plan for systems change—one grounded in relational power, boundless imagination, and continuous learning**.** The next brief in this series will move from vision to action, exploring practical strategies, tools, and real-world examples of how human service organizations can apply BSP-informed CQI approaches to strengthen governance, implementation, continuous learning, and community engagement efforts within human services systems.

Together, these briefs will offer a roadmap for leaders ready to move beyond incremental improvement towards transformational systems change, charting a course toward equity, trust and sustainable impact.

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Chapin Hall partners with policymakers, practitioners, and philanthropists at the forefront of research and policy development by applying a unique blend of scientific research, real-world experience, and policy expertise to construct actionable information, practical tools, and, ultimately, positive change for children and families.

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. For more information about Chapin Hall, visit www.chapinhall.org or @Chapin_Hall.

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Disclosure Statement

The authors used Claude, an artificial intelligence tool developed by Anthropic, to support language refinement and editing in the preparation of this brief. All policy content, analysis, citations, and final editorial decisions are the sole responsibilities of the authors.

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