
Quality Qorner

Simple, But Not Easy

It all seems so simple. You drive to the trailhead, put on your hiking boots and set to out see the wonders of nature in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming. But wait! What about water, and food, and sunscreen, and lip balm, and mosquito repellent, and map, and raingear, and camera, and binoculars, and bandana, and sunglasses, and visor, and bear bell, and whistle, and jackknife, and some blister treatment, and... OK, then all that stuff gets crammed into the daypack and it is time to hit the trail.

But wait! First it's 95 degrees! No, it's hailing! Now it's 68 degrees! And then we have to go up 2,000 feet to see the natural bridge and waterfall, and my pack is heavy, and my legs are tired, and now I have to cross this stream, and... hey, whatever happened to hiking being simple? Actually, hiking *is* simple—you just walk. But the journey is not *easy*...and there's the catch.

As I made my way up the contour lines shown on the topographic map, I was thinking about how this "simple, but not easy" concept applies to the laboratory's general lack of interest in implementing a quality management system to achieve better performance. Yes, despite being surrounded by summer's bounty of wildflowers, wild animals, and birds, my mind will occasionally drift to my work passion—if only to find some correlation...and an idea for a column!

The quality system model, published by CLSI as HS1-A2, *A Quality Management System Model for Health Care*, is elegantly simple, having only 2 main parts. The T-shaped model depicts a set of quality system essentials (QSEs) that support all the laboratory's work operations. The idea is for the laboratory to identify, document, and implement the policies, processes, and procedures for both the QSEs and the work operations. Then we train everyone to follow the processes and procedures, measure how well they are working, and improve them wherever we can. The result is better use of resources (efficiency), consistent compliance with requirements (effectiveness), and better patient safety (minimal error). How much more simple could that be?

As simple as the model is, laboratories are finding that it is not always easy to get a quality management system embraced, implemented, and operating effectively. Why is something that seems so simple to understand so hard to make real? Just as it takes commitment, time, and the correct gear to successfully reach one's hiking goal, it also takes commitment, time, and the correct tools to achieve efficient and effective laboratory management and operations that maximize patient safety.

Need for commitment. It is hard to break out of old paradigms such as QC/QA defining laboratory quality and "SOPs" being the only kind of documents a laboratory needs. For the organization to break away someone needs to commit to seeing the bigger picture and, if it is not laboratory leadership, then who should it be? It may be possible to build a quality management system from the grassroots up; however, like the 2,000-foot climb, it will not be easy. So, without a leader who has a sense of the trail, who should be the one to first step out? Why should he or she make the solo effort without organizational support?

Need for time. Just as the hike is as much about the birds,

wildflowers, animals, scenery, and experiences encountered along the way to the goal, quality is also a journey, not just a destination. A high-quality journey—whether a hike in the mountains or implementing a quality management system—is going to take some preparation time; it does not just happen. Quality management is not a flavor of the month to be taste-tested for a while right before an accreditation inspection, then back to business as usual. We are so busy putting out fires that we cannot find the time to do it right the first time! It will be hard to ignite some passion into a staff that is battle-weary and burned-out because nothing ever gets any easier. So, in addition to leadership commitment, time is needed to build an organizational culture that is based on quality and that will permeate all the attitudes and activities of all the staff all of the time.

Need for tools. Using a hiking staff greatly facilitates a difficult stream crossing, and using the appropriate quality management tools helps keep us on the implementation path. Without having properly documented work processes and procedures, all the QC in the laboratory will not prevent patient identification and sample accessioning errors. Likewise, retraining attributed to lack of technical competence will not reduce errors that are either inherent in an ineffectively designed work process or due to ineffective, inconsistent training. We cannot improve laboratory performance tomorrow if we do not know how well we are performing now. We need to use tools such as process flowcharting, document templates, training guides, measurement indicators, and internal audits to determine current performance and achieve continuous improvement.

Hiking will always be simple—you just walk. But what can I do to make the journey go from "not easy" to "less hard"? I need to make the commitment to stay fit, I need to allow time to achieve the goal, and I need to carry the proper equipment. The quality management system model also will stay simple—we will see to that. But what can be done to transform implementing a quality management system from being "not easy" to "less hard"? The laboratory needs to make a commitment, make the time, and use the tools.

Budget cuts and staff downsizing will not result in an efficient, effective laboratory that positively affects patient safety. However, "the laboratory" is not the walls, the equipment, and the supplies. The laboratory is *you*. So...*you* find the commitment, take the time, and learn about and use the appropriate tools. Then attaining quality can become both simple *and* easy.

This Month's Quality Quote:

"Good quality is never achieved by accident."

—Katsuyoshi Ishihara

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