

Quality Qorner

Lessons from a Legend

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If you've heard me speak before about quality, you'll know I often insert quotes from one of my favorite quality gurus, Philip Crosby, who is most well known for his role in introducing the concept of zero defects in the manufacturing sector. He coined the phrases "quality is free" and "quality without tears" to communicate to executive management teams in the 1960s that quality is conformance to requirements; therefore, quality can be measured by the cost of nonconformance and, by following this logic, a performance goal is zero defects.

I first started to read Crosby's articles and books in the early 1990s when our hospital launched its continuous improvement program and I was chosen to be in the first group of trained team leaders and facilitators. Although, as a medical laboratory professional, I'd been trained in the principles of method quality control and doing the best for our patients, the concept of building quality into the work processes from the beginning to achieve zero defects was new thinking in the health care environment. As a blood banker, where zero defects is expected and necessary, I was hooked. I began translating everything I could read by the industrial quality gurus into health care and laboratory language so that I could apply it in our hospital's laboratory and, ultimately, as a speaker and consultant, teach it to others.

Here are Philip Crosby's 5 absolutes of quality management, with my take on what they mean in laboratory language. Whether you agree with me or not, I hope you at least think about Crosby's statements in light of your laboratory's—and your own—performance.

1. Quality means conformance, not elegance. Medical laboratories must conform to the requirements of regulatory bodies that affect them, such as the many federal and state agency laws (eg, CLIA '88, STD reporting), as well as voluntary accreditation requirements (eg, JCAHO, CAP, AABB, and COLA). Elaborate information technology, high-end analyzers, and state-of-the-art facilities are not needed to produce quality results! From the smallest basic testing laboratories in Africa, to our own country's small rural and physician office laboratories, to the biggest national commercial laboratories, the key to conformance is building work processes in a manner that meets requirements. Only a piece of paper and a pencil (with a big eraser!) are needed to create a flowchart of a work process and build requirements into its respective activities.

2. There is no such thing as a quality problem. There are 3 types of problems. System problems account for 90% or more of problems. The system (ie, process) does not work; thus, removing the root cause of the process problem removes the problem. The second type of problem is a knowledge problem, where either the staff was not trained or the training was ineffective; only improving the training effort will solve this problem. The third type of problem is behavioral, which means willful disregard of the requirements. Although rare, this problem can be found in health care workers and is solved only through appropriate personnel interventions.

3. It is always cheaper to do the job right the first time.

Good quality management is always preventive. Building work processes to meet requirements, and training staff to follow the processes, is always less expensive than inspecting, checking, rechecking, and other nonpreventive techniques added to work processes that are already often unnecessarily complex. Laboratories are well advised to understand and document work processes and train staff in the processes, not individual "SOPs."

4. The only performance measure is the cost of quality. Laboratory quality assurance reports often contain statistics about how many incidents occurred of some event, such as wasted blood components, blood culture contamination, and sample problems. However, the language of hospital administration is money, and if laboratories want to solve the problem of unacceptable samples, they'll have to show their administrators the economic impact of re-collections, including all the time to revise information, as well as the direct cost of labor and supplies.

5. The only performance standard is zero defects. All errors and defects have root causes. Only removal of the root cause will completely remove the problem. The fast, often unrelenting, pace of laboratory work often forces laboratory professionals to create "work-arounds," which, in the end, only make a bad process more complex and more likely to cause yet another defect. Staff members who do the work often know the underlying contributing factors and often make good suggestions for improvement.

If you are a "bench level" laboratory professional, you may think that this column applies only to your supervisors, managers, and directors. Not so. Every one of Crosby's absolutes applies to individuals as well as to laboratory management. First, you can understand and help document your work processes. Second, you can identify system and knowledge problems, bring them to your management's attention, and help with solutions. Third, you can make a personal choice to do something right the first time. Fourth, you can help your supervisors identify all the elements to consider when determining the cost of a laboratory activity so that nothing is overlooked. Last, avoid the temptation to settle for a work-around that only complicates your process. There has to be—and almost always is—a faster, better, and cheaper way.

This Month's Quality Quote:

"Our systems are far too complex to expect merely extraordinary people to perform perfectly every time."

—James Conway, *Institute for Healthcare Improvement*

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