

# Quality Qorner

## Your New Year's Breakfast

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How timely! Just as I was pondering the theme for my next Quality Qorner column I opened a magazine and the advertisement on the first page read, "Are car companies committed to quality, or to the phrase 'committed to quality'?" It's easy to ask that question about car makers. How about if we ask—and answer—it about our own laboratories?

So, is your laboratory really committed to quality or just to the phrase? To answer that question you might ask yourselves, "What has our laboratory done within the last 12 months that proves our commitment to quality on behalf of the patients we serve? What have I personally done in the last 12 months that proves my personal commitment to quality laboratory operations?"

I'm not talking about performing quality control on testing methods. I'm talking about a much bigger quality scope. When the laboratory's customers—physicians, nurses, patients, and other laboratories—are asked what they want most from the medical laboratory, the answer is always along the line of "accurate results in a timely manner." Therefore, the bigger quality scope is to ask our laboratories and ourselves "What has my laboratory done/What have I personally done to improve the provision of accurate results in a timely manner to our customers?"

It's the end of the year now, so it's a good time to reflect on your laboratory's quality activities. Where to start, you ask? Why, the best place to start is always with the quality system model of 12 Quality System Essentials (QSEs) that serve as the management foundation for your laboratory's path of workflow.

Following is a set of questions related to the Quality System model you could ask to determine your laboratory's commitment to good quality in the past year. See if you can determine your laboratory's "commitment quotient" for the past year. Then, identify any gaps and resolve to tackle them in the new year.

- Do we plan for quality by building the requirements into each new or changed process or procedure? (QSE: Organization)
- Have we organized, within our laboratory's physical imitations, as close to a unidirectional work flow as possible? (QSE: Facilities and Safety)
- Do we have a reliable employee training program that provides consistency in training delivery and outcomes? (QSE: Personnel)
- Does every piece of laboratory equipment have a schedule and procedures for calibration (where required) and maintenance? (QSE: Equipment)
- Does our system for reagent inventory ensure that we have what we need when we need it and never outdate anything? (QSE: Purchasing and Inventory)

- Have we documented our actual work processes and not simply written a bunch of analyte-based SOPs that no one follows? (QSE: Process Control)
- Do we have records that provide objective evidence of performing all required QC and any necessary follow up? (QSE: Documents and Records)
- Do we have an effective system for computer downtime such that result reporting is not seriously affected? (QSE: Information Management)
- Do we analyze events that should not have happened and determine which processes are not working properly? (QSE: Occurrence Management)
- Do we know the number and source of samples we receive that are unacceptable for testing and how much it costs to get these replaced? (QSE: Assessments)
- Do we know what our customers like and dislike most about our service to them? (QSE: Customer Service)
- Did we improve at least one laboratory process that is still, and has stayed, improved? (QSE: Process Improvement)

What about your personal commitment to quality? Did you always do your assigned QC, calibration, and maintenance and document it properly? Did you follow approved procedures without personal deviations? Did you make a suggestion for improving a process or procedure that you found didn't work as intended? Did you volunteer to serve on a laboratory improvement project?

We are not perfect and our laboratories are not perfect. But we can resolve to continue working toward meeting our commitment of accurate results in a timely manner.

My former mentor and colleague, David Nevalainen, always used to end his quality programs by showing a slide of a breakfast plate of ham and eggs. Then he would say, "Look at this plate. Whereas the chicken was involved, the pig was truly committed. So, eat a good breakfast but always be a pig!"

Now, *there's* a New Year's resolution for you and your laboratory! Let's all be pigs for quality!

### *This Month's Quality Quote:*

"First, say to yourself what you should be—and then do what you have to do."

—*Epictetus*

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