



System Safety in Healthcare

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Quality Improvement Methods in Healthcare: Good Practices and Bad Practices

A Johns Hopkins study in 2018 claims that more than 250,000 people in the United States die every year from medical errors. Other reports claim the numbers to be as high as 440,000. At that time, medical errors are the third-leading cause of death, after heart disease and cancer [Ref. 1].

Hospitals make more money when they make mistakes, and reducing mistakes could actually cut into a hospital's profits, according to a study by the managing director at the Boston Consulting Group, reported in *The New York Times* [Ref. 2]. This article shows very profitable examples of the good, as well as bad, practice of medicine.

Good Practices

We have learned how quality is defined, we have learned strategies for quality management, we have learned how to use statistics to measure quality, and we have learned about leadership for performance excellence. When we think of quality and excellence one company stands out: the Disney Company.

Although Walt Disney is no longer alive to manage the company, it was built — and still runs today — on his standards of excellence. Disney offers some of the best customer service in the world [Ref. 3]. This quality does not come by accident. It is well thought out and comes by “carefully constructed plans that are well followed.”

Walt Disney encouraged employees to take pride in their work, and that feedback is an opportunity to improve [Ref. 3]. These are concepts we need to implement with senior management.

No one can explain quality and excellence better than a quote from Walt himself: “Whatever you do, do it well. Do it so well that when people see you do it, they will want to come back and see you do it again, and they

will want to bring others and show them how well you do what you do.”

Bad Practices

It is obvious that the philosophy of continuous quality management is accountability. In fact, being accountable means holding people responsible for their actions. Many employers try to place blame when business is bad or failing, but they are not holding specific individuals accountable for not meeting their goals or requirements. For that reason, employees are not really listening.

Moreover, lack of accountability is rarely deliberate and can be a sign of underlying issues. For instance, unspecified roles and responsibilities, inadequate resources and poor strategic and unrealistic goals are just some of the reasons for a lack of accountability. On the other hand, communicating that there is a lack of accountability can sometimes seem threatening to team members.

A classic example is the use of the Six Sigma tool in quality improvement. It takes at least 10 years for this tool to attain its goal of 1.4 defects per million opportunities. That means *thousands* of patients will be killed while the tool is being implemented for a duration of 10 years because the progress is too slow. You rarely see any accountability addressed, which has to start with the senior management. Very rarely does senior management question why it is taking 10 years for this tool to work. Can they tolerate thousands of patients dying from this poorly planned process?

It is OK to use the Six Sigma to keep improving. But we need more *speed*, which has a lot to do with accountability. Dr. Edward Deming, the world quality guru, used to say that 85% of quality problems originate from poor management. ●

References

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3. Foster, Michelle. “How Disney Beats All Others in Customer Service,” Disney Information Station, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://www.wdwinfo.com/disneylandcalifornia/how-disney-beats-all-others-in-customer-service/>.