

Procedure Writing

By Dr. John Robert Dew

Procedures play an important role in safeguarding against quality, environmental, and health and safety problems. People often learn, or are reminded, how to perform a task through procedures. Since the human memory is prone to play tricks on everyone, it is highly likely that most people will forget how to do a task that is not repeated with great frequency, hence the need for procedures.

Procedures often include checklists that provide extra control to assure that work is performed properly. Procedures also provide detailed information about instrument settings, safety precautions, and special problems that are known to occur.

TRIBAL CULTURES AND PROCEDURES

Some organizations do not have procedures or guidelines, or have them but do not actively use them due to a tribal culture. In a tribal culture, knowledge is handed down verbally (or in protected individual notes) from one worker to the next. Little information is formally set in procedures, and there may not be any agreed-upon standard as to how the work is to be performed. Each person does the work in the manner that he or she was instructed, along with whatever special enhancements the person has decided to add (or has forgotten or ignored). The lack of a proceduralized work system and the presence of a tribal culture constitute a broad category of root cause that will enable numerous types of near-misses and

small problems to occur, and that sets the stage for major quality, environmental, and health and safety failures to occur.

People who work in a tribal culture are protective of their cultural norms. Knowledge, after all, is power, and in the tribal culture, knowledge is carefully guarded. Knowledge assures job security. Since knowledge is limited in the tribal culture, people do not ask questions that challenge other people's methods. It is assumed that they know what they are doing because they have been initiated into the tribe.

In the absence of an agreed-upon procedure for performing a task, people rely on the education and training they have received. This introduces variation in how tasks are performed and assures that there is no single, standard, best practice being used in the organization. New people who join the organization, and who have more up to date knowledge, may even be encouraged to adopt less-effective work practices as part of the tribal culture.

Some tribal organizations actually have procedures, but no one will use them. In these cases, the procedures are often out of date and no longer accurate, so people know that it is not safe to use them. There is a great deal of cynicism about procedures in a tribal culture and strong resistance to using them.

Tribal cultures, are, of course, rife with errors, environmental insults, accidents, exposures, and quality problems.. In the absence of agreed-upon work practices and a clear reference point for work, people make errors without any idea that they have done anything improper. In a tribal culture it is possible to be taught to do a job incorrectly and to do it consistently wrong for a long time.

Management creates and sustains the tribal culture. Managers in this situation often have

no concept of an effective procedure-based organization. If the managers have spent their entire careers working in tribal cultures, they will think it is perfectly normal and that the concept of proceduralizing major tasks is a waste of time.

Management rationalizes the tribal culture by pointing out that the employees have all earned degrees in nursing or medicine from accredited schools. However, some academic programs are stronger than others. Students make an A in some classes and a C in others. Overall grade point averages vary and are rarely a factor in employment. Medical knowledge changes every year so that the best practice in 1992 will be out of date by 2002.

Only management can lead the organization out of the tribal culture and into an effective procedure-based mode of operations. Management is responsible for setting the expectation of safeguarded work based on procedures and providing the resources to discuss best practices and to write and maintain procedures. However, the time invested in establishing a procedure-based organization is returned many times over in the reduction of mistakes, improved quality of patient care, reduced patient concerns, and reduced regulatory problems.

The work environment of today is vastly different than even 20 years ago. Policies and procedures are critical as the use of advanced technology increases. There are numerous reasons to have an effective process for procedure development, dissemination, and revision. Regulatory guidelines and expectations, staff education, and the organization's desire to perform procedures consistently are perhaps the primary reasons for an effective procedure program.

Attributes of a Tribal vs. a Procedure-Based Culture

Tribal Culture	Procedure-Based Culture
Individuals “own” knowledge about work processes.	Individuals share knowledge that everyone “owns.”
Knowledge is informally collected and retained in individuals’ notes.	Knowledge is formally collected and retained in procedures.
Each individual performs a task their best way.	Everyone performs a task the best way.
People ignore anomalies.	Anomalies stand out as problems or potential problems.
New people must learn on their own by doing a job, or depend on the good will of others to share.	New people have full access to the body of knowledge via procedures.
No formalized hold points, check-offs, or verifications.	Formalized hold-points in doing work, check-off lists specified, and requirements for verifications or peer review are clear.
Frequent use of informal work-arounds when problems are encountered.	Condition reporting is used when problems are encountered.

GROUND RULES FOR DEVELOPING PROCEDURES

It is easy to get off on the wrong foot when developing procedures. People make procedures too long, and write the procedures as if they will be read by an expert. People often forget

that the person using the procedure may be under stress, or may not have the same degree of education or training as the person writing the procedure. Therefore, it is important not to make the procedure too complicated or bog it down with complex numbering and identification systems.

Here are the ground rules for developing effective procedures.

1. Make them short and to the point. Be specific.
 - a. How to operate a piece of equipment.
 - b. How to administer a treatment.
 - c. How to run a test.
 - d. How to do maintenance on equipment.
2. The person who uses the procedure is a customer. Write with the customer in mind, not the expert.
3. Develop procedures that can be read and used under stress.
4. Use a simple numbering and identification system.
5. Place procedures where the users can get them.

The last point deserves some elaboration. It may be economical to group the procedures in a central location or to place them on a computer system. This is fine as long as the people who need to get to the procedure can do so. If it is difficult to get to the procedure, people will not use it and mistakes will come back into the system.

THE PROCEDURE WRITING PROCESS

People can waste a great deal of time writing procedures if they do not have an effective process. Time is wasted in writing material that is technically inaccurate because

the writer did not get out and look at the job or interview the staff. If a person has poor organizational skills, he or she will not be effective in organizing information into a procedure.

Here are the actions that make up an effective procedure writing process.

1. Look at the job.
2. Organize your information. Use a flow diagram to establish the sequence of work and integrate your firsthand observation with manuals and regulatory standards.
3. Write down the information.
4. Walk it down and check it out. Make sure the procedure is usable, accurate, has the right level of detail and fits your general guidelines for procedures.
5. Roll it out. Get it in the users' hands.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING PROCEDURES

Procedure writing is unlike other forms of writing. In school you were encouraged to use large words and fairly long sentences. The opposite is true for writing good procedures.

Here are some guidelines for writing good procedures.

1. Use short sentences.
2. Use active voice. (“Turn the switch” instead of “the switch should be turned”)
3. Be direct. Tell the reader what to do.
4. Use short words. (“Raise” instead of “elevate”)
5. Do not use abbreviations or acronyms.
6. Be consistent with terminology.
7. Do not assume the reader knows something.
8. Put steps in the right sequence.

9. Use headings to help organize information. This helps people find information quickly and understand the flow of the procedure.

10. Use 1, 2, 3 □ not one, two, three.

The objective in writing a procedure is to give the reader crisp and clear information.

Additional information is usually not a good idea. When extra details may be helpful, or when the reader might need some background information, it should not be buried in the text. Action steps and notes should be laid out in separate columns so that the reader can move quickly through the action steps and be able to refer to notes on an as-needed basis.

PROBLEMS TO WATCH OUT FOR

There are some common problems you can expect to meet when setting up a procedure program. Here are a few typical things that can go wrong in writing a good procedure:

1. Do not put the actions in the notes column.
2. Clearly mark any warnings or cautions. It is a good idea to use bold print for these or to put them in a highlighted area.
3. Put warnings before an action step, not after.
4. Do not put multiple steps into a paragraph. Separate steps so they are visible.
5. Include emergency steps and highlight them. The emergency steps are what people are looking for when under stress.
6. Use specified ranges, not plus or minus some value.
7. Do not require calculations to use the procedure. Give them in notes, if useful.
8. Make sure you have included the flow down of any upper level requirements into the procedure.

What does flow down of an upper-level requirement mean? If your facility has a policy that

requires the control of biological waste materials, then this needs to flow down into the procedures on the patient unit or department. Procedures are the mechanism for assuring that upper-tier policy decisions become concrete actions in the patient's room.

USE FLOW CHARTS TO ORGANIZE

Flow charts are handy tools to help get information organized for writing a procedure. Procedure writers can sketch their own rough charts as they observe the performance of a task and interview the people who are doing work to get everything in the correct order.

It is also a good idea to put a flow diagram into a procedure to give people a quick visual concept of the overall work flow. Action items are placed inside of blocks and connected by arrows that indicate the sequence of steps. Decision points are indicated by diamonds, which are also connected to actions by the arrows.

USE MIND MAPS TO GET STARTED ON COMPLEX TASKS

Mind maps are great tools for organizing information related to administrative and complex tasks prior to writing a procedure (Buzan, 1982) The guidelines for developing a mind map are:

1. Start with a central theme and place it in the middle of the page.
2. Identify major categories related to the central theme and connect them by solid lines.
3. Always print.
4. Draw pictures of the theme and categories to stimulate your thinking.
5. Use colors on your mind map. This stimulates your thinking.
6. Use connecting lines to link all ideas to the central theme.

7. Complete the whole image before starting to write the procedure.
8. If necessary, organize the information on the mind map into a linear flow diagram.

Developing a mind map allows you to quickly sketch out the key elements that should be included in a procedure. Once you have developed the mind map, the steps can be arranged in the correct sequence for text, and a flow diagram can be easily prepared to help readers understand the work flow.

For more information on mind maps, visit <http://www.mindtools.com/mindmaps.html>

PROCEDURE REVIEW PROCESS

Managers in organizations should establish teams to conduct periodic reviews of procedures on at least a three-year cycle. Each team should involve practitioners and trainers to ensure that the procedure remains current and reflects what has become the best practice in the industry since the last review.

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