THE CUSTOMERS OF RENTAL CO-OP West Michigan Shared Hospital Laundry expect all products to be free of defect. So when it comes to ensuring that the hourly employees deliver that level of quality, Nicole Grubich, CLLM, RLLD, reminds them of what is important.

“I asked them to put themselves in the situation where they had a family member in the hospital. ‘Would you want something stained? Would that be acceptable to you?’ We try to balance a high productivity level with the ability to slow down and look for defects,” said Grubich, the laundry’s executive director.

While not every laundry client has a zero-tolerance policy for defects, quality is increasingly important. “Clients are not just looking for the lowest price anymore,” Grubich said. “They’re looking for quality in the product and in the services we provide.”

With such high demands, developing a culture of quality—one that is communicated throughout every level of the operation—is paramount.

“We need our employees engaged in the whole process,” said Scott Sadlier, senior director at Florida Hospital Laundry. Sadlier worked in the laundry industry in hospitality for 18 years before moving to laundry in healthcare. “We can implement many procedures and processes. But it’s the people doing the actual work that make it happen,” he said.

Steeped in Culture
Building the right culture is something that Charles Berge, president and general manager of Shared Hospital Services, considers a process. “In order to develop a quality culture and product, it starts with the people,” he said.

Berge has worked to remove an “us and them” culture from the organization and takes time each day to walk the production floor, greeting each employee. “It may not sound like much, but the ROI on that time invested cannot be measured. If there is an open spot at
a folder or the ironer I will jump in and start feeding the machine. The message has always been that I understand what you do each and every day and I wouldn’t ask them to do something I wasn’t willing to do.”

Creating that culture of quality in service and products means empowering each employee to make a determination on whether the item they are touching meets the standards that the customer expects. “They have to know that they have the ability to make that judgment at that workstation,” Berge said. “There are a lot of checks and balances that go into that. If you surround yourself with quality people that understand the direction you want to go and give them the tools to accomplish that, you will deliver a quality product.”

Quality is influenced by the textile, equipment and chemistry, but people are paramount. That includes building an environment of teamwork, where each employee understands “that there is another person down the line,” he said. “Everything rolls downhill. If that person stopped it before it got to the next person, it could save a lot of work.”

It means training employees to identify products that should never start through the production cycle and should be “ragged out.” He believes a key step in that process is managers treating all employees with dignity and fairness.

“When you create an environment like that, people want to perform better.”

And then, give them the tools to do the job. “How can you justify holding them to production numbers if the folder is breaking down all the time or if they have to spend a few minutes removing a jam?”

As a cooperative health care laundry now in its 41st year, Shared Hospital Services is comprised of four member healthcare organizations and more than 200 retail accounts. Berge stated that the facility processes over 15 million pounds a year.

Berge is relatively new on the job, having been in his current position for two years. But in his 37 years in laundry, he has worked for an industrial laundry, an equipment manufacturer, as a design engineer and in textile sales. His experience provides insight into the role that each plays in the finished product. When he got to Shared Hospital Services, for instance, he realized that the company was purchasing a poor quality linen—making it difficult to deliver a quality product. He issued a linen RFP and received better pricing for better quality product than what the organization had been purchasing.

He also upgraded the equipment, adding new folders that deliver sharp, crisp folds.

While those played important roles, it was a management reorganization that made the biggest improvements. “When I first got here, I realized the assistant general manager did not have the customer service support underneath her to fully support the customers we have,” Berge said. “We did an annual customer service survey at each of the hospitals, but we didn’t do anything with the results. The assistant general manager didn’t have time to meet with retail customers.”

The survey was simplified and an acute care service manager and a retail customer service manager were hired. Both receive bonuses based upon the quality scores. That provides buy-in, he said, where the onsite managers are seeking out managers and staff to ensure that they are happy with the quality—and to fix it when they aren’t. The acute care service manager and retail customer service manager are required to meet with customers on a quarterly basis.

“What I like about this interaction is that, for the customer, they can now put a face to Shared Hospital Services,” Berge said.

Financial Pressures

Linen quality may convey an image about the laundry facility to the customer, but it also can say a lot about the perception of the hotel or hospital to the guest or patient. No one knows that better than Sadlier, who spent nearly two decades at Disney before moving into healthcare. “People today have choices of where they want to go for a hospital or a hotel stay. They want to feel they are getting quality in their purchase. Linen can influence that perception,” he said.

Making the leap from nearly two decades at Disney into healthcare is not the significant swerve that it might seem. “Both bring unique challenges,” Sadlier said. “The biggest difference is in the
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type of staining. In hospitality, it’s suntan lotion, lipstick and makeup. In healthcare it’s more an issue of CHG (Chlorhexidine Gluconate) staining that you don’t see until dry. Also, things like a nurse attaching tape to a bedsheet, and the adhesive will not wash out,” Sadlier said.

But there is one commonality. “People today have choices of where they want to go for a hospital or a hotel stay. They want to feel they are getting quality in their purchase. Linen can influence that perception,” he said.

In healthcare, it is all the more important with the implementation of Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) surveys, which use patient scores to determine patient satisfaction ratings.

Hotels also have pressure to improve the guest experience in an increasingly competitive environment. Linens play a part in that perception.

Balancing both financial and quality standards drive a switch from a “sheer production mindset to making sure good quality products are being delivered,” Sadlier said.

Regardless of the type of end user, internally owned laundries are cost centers and not part of the core business of hotels or hospitals. Consequently, “we always have to justify our costs,” Sadlier said. “The outsourcing question will come up occasionally if production is out of line with costs.”

This means walking a fine line between being production-focused and ensuring quality standards are being met.

“A big challenge in hospitals is the perception, ‘If it has blood, discard it,’ not knowing the laundry facility removes a large percentage of this type of staining,” Sadlier said. Working closely with hospitals to educate nursing staff to return items typically discarded has allowed recovery. This has added up to $100,000 in savings in six months. Doing so has improved HCAHPS scores from 86 percent to 91 percent.

Sadlier saw the same type of successes in hospitality. “People had the idea there is an unlimited amount of linens,” he said. “We educated our customers and showed they are a big part of quality control. If feeding 480 sheets per hour, not all stains are going to be caught. But if the nursing staff places the linen in the proper bags indicating stained items, it greatly helps the process.”

**Inspection vs. Production**

Quality is everyone’s job—including the customers. But the frontline employees are key. “Obviously when they are running towels through a folder or sheets through an ironer, they get a brief moment to look at it and recognize any quality rejects,” Berge said. “They each have to know the guidelines of what we find is acceptable and unacceptable. Are they perfect every time? Absolutely not.”

At West Michigan, clients return anything that can’t be used for credit and Grubich keeps a close eye on rejects, rewash and customer perception. “Each of our 20 laundry managers are required to pull 10 samples from 10 products each month; therefore, 2000 pieces of linen are checked for defects every month. Our managers also provide on the spot cash incentives to employees who have zero defects.”

Users are surveyed about the products they receive and the size of holes that are acceptable. The goal, Grubich said, is no stains or tears. But she realizes that is unachievable. “By setting the bar high, you’re aiming for what you realize you’ll get, so that takes you over the threshold. For example, if you say a hole can only be the size of a quarter, then you’re opening yourself up to large holes getting through. Maybe a small tear will get through. But if you say, ‘No holes,’ then perhaps less will get through.”

Quality may be hard to achieve, but it is even harder to define, Berge said. “You have the customer who expects brand new every time. And you have the customer that will take anything that comes to them. Somewhere in between is this wave of quality. It will fluctuate as new goods are put in. But if I provided new goods to everybody on every delivery, we’d be out of business. If I provided rags to everybody, I’d be out of business. We have to find a happy medium.”

**An Inside Perspective**

As linen distribution manager at Texas Health Harris Methodist Fort Worth, Eva Granado finds herself in the middle, ensuring that a quality product comes in from the laundry and goes out to each floor. The linen vendor has compiled a book that lists all the items available—and details acceptable levels of quality. “We have spot checks as it comes in to make sure it meets the level that we ordered,” she said. “We’re always looking to make sure they have met the fill rates.”

Quality is not a perfect science, but constant communication—with both the vendor and clinicians—is important. Much of that is in the small things, like ensuring that the nurses know who to contact when someone is out of the office. Communication with the vendor is made easier thanks to the booklet.

“This is something that is great to provide to your customers,” Granado believes. It helps her to achieve the goal of ensuring that “all the hard work stays in the background. Linen is one of the things in a hospital that you want to be invisible.”

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**Waste Not**

Even when textiles are contaminated with a high volume of blood, they do not meet the definition of “regulated waste” and should not be discarded. This is confirmed in OSHA’s 2013 letter of interpretation to ALM, which can be found at www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_table=INTERPRETATIONS&p_id=29441.
“Our 20-year old Milnor tunnel is still working so well, we couldn’t bring ourselves to replace it.”

– Jesse Jackson, President, Jackson Services, Columbus, NE

Jackson has trusted Horwath Laundry Equipment, the local authorized Milnor distributor, for four generations. President Jim Horwath said, “We would not normally recommend opting out of replacing a 20-year-old workwear tunnel. Milnor’s ability to support their products (well beyond the life compared to most manufacturers), made us comfortable with this solution.”

Recently, Jackson Services installed four new 6464 pass-through dryers, one 48040 M7K 275 lb. capacity tilting washer-extractor, and a 68036 M5K 400-500 lb. capacity tilting washer-extractor.

Milnor worked to update the veteran tunnel with new software and integrate it with the new Milnor M-series washer-extractors, pass-through dryers, and rail system. Jackson is proud to say that productivity is increasing steadily. “At times we’ve had to throttle the washroom to slow it down because production is so fast that the rest of the plant has to catch up!”

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Helpful Tip

Remember: Any linen taken into an occupied patient room is considered contaminated. Rejects found at this point need to be placed in a reject linen bag that is kept with soiled linen.

She believes that people only notice when something is wrong, but that it contributes to the overall perception of the facility. “We make sure the sheets are folded beautifully, that the flap is down. There are no stains and it is delivered on time. It’s a lot of hard work to stay in the background.”

Opportunities to Grow

If it seems that today’s laundry is pressured to keep costs down and quality high, it does not negate the opportunities to grow. Grubich recently grew her specialty department to service customers with ancillary products like cubicle curtains and residents’ clothing. Customer-owned goods are separated from the rest of the pooled linens in colored bags. Staff is trained to separate the colored bags and tag them by customer.

Providing this service required an overhaul of the entire process at the laundry. “If we can’t provide that service for our clients, someone else will,” Grubich said.

So new policies were developed. Hospital staff was trained. And the laundry added staff and equipment, including small conventional washers and dryers. “Some of those items are not manufactured to go through large tunnel washers and require different wash formulas.”

That level of customer service has come at a cost. “You can’t charge the customer for specialty items the same way you do for general pooled bed linens,” Grubich said. “When we did our proforma for the ancillary items process, we made sure to set our prices so that they are competitive, yet ensure a profit margin that pleases our owners. At the end of the day, this service allows us to compete with our competitors.”

It also has helped the laundry prevent losses that could have come if another provider had been contracted for the ancillary products. “Not providing these ancillary services puts us at risk to not only lose the business to another service, but it also puts us at risk for increased linen loss. When two processors are servicing the same facility, the linen is bound to get mixed.”

At the end of the day, though, developing new services to meet clients’ requests is just another way of enhancing the quality. “Quality isn’t just measuring the defects with the linen. It’s in the service you provide,” Grubich said. “In today’s competitive industry, you have to stand out. If you don’t, someone else will. Yes, there is a cost to providing quality service; but the payback comes with loyalty and customer retention.”

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