EVERY LAUNDRY OPERATION LARGE AND small wants to provide a quality product and experience. To achieve that worthy goal is rarely simple or easy. True quality doesn’t begin when the product is delivered to the customer, but has to be achieved at every step of the operation from beginning to end.

There are a wide variety of tools that can be implemented by any laundry operation – whether large or small. These systems include Quality Assurance Process Improvement, Lean Six Sigma, 5S and others. They provide ways of organizing operations for greater efficiency, eliminating waste, and building a culture of quality throughout the organization.

“In order to know where you’re at in terms of meeting your own internal expectations as well as your customer’s expectations, there has to be a way to define, measure, or quantify exactly what is happening in those areas,” says Cindy Molk, CLLM, RLLD, Director of Linen and Central Services for the Mayo Clinic. “Otherwise you can’t know where you’re at and you can’t know where you’re going.”

CoPs

With a growing body of regulations covering hospitals, long term care facilities and other organizations, the laundry industry must sometimes meet very exacting standards for performance. Hospitals are governed by Federal Medicare Conditions of Participation (CoPs), which make them responsible for oversight of contracted services. They must ensure that a contractor’s services meet accepted standards of practice.

“...
accreditation," says Molko. Maintaining this accreditation is also essential for reimbursement from Medicare, Medicaid "and other payors that want to make sure we're doing the right things for our patients," she adds.

A commercial laundry will have to demonstrate that it's following guidelines by providing quality data.

HCAHPS Surveys

Failures of quality linked to vendors can also show up in surveys such as the HCAHPS (Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems) survey. It asks patients a wide range of questions about their hospital stay including their satisfaction with the entire spectrum of their stay and care. Problems are likely to show up in lower scores for hospitals.

Quality begins by ensuring vendors are delivering quality products and services to the laundry. In turn laundries must provide quality to their customers. Product flowing through the plant must be quality checked before it reaches the hospital and patient. Regularly specified checkpoints in the laundry process will increase the likelihood of these items being discovered and removed before they are shipped to the customer.

"In healthcare laundries there will be defects," says Andrew Boyd, Executive Vice President with Encompass Group, LLC. "These could consist of a product that has been stained beyond use, cut during a procedure or a product that has an adhesive electrode pad left on it."

"Depending on how far upstream that is found, the laundry can kick the product out before going through the ironer, folder or being loaded onto a cart," says Boyd. "The sooner the defect is found the less costly it is to have it travel through the system."

QAPI

Quality Assurance and Process Improvement (QAPI) takes a systematic, comprehensive, and data-driven approach to maintaining and improving safety and quality and creative problem solving. It is organized around five elements: Design and Scope, Governance and Leadership, Feedback, Data Systems and Monitoring, Performance Improvement Projects (PIP’s), and Systematic Analysis and Systemic Action.

It requires that organizations identify the problem and the desired outcome and then gather data needed to make the change. This is followed by making the improvements, reviewing the actions and adjusting the plan as needed to lock in changes.

"The data that you can collect from a business like a laundry or a linen distribution function is out there, but you have to know what you want in terms of that information," says Molko. "Then you measure at key points to ask 'Are we where we want to be?' 'Are we where we need to be?' More importantly, 'Are we where our customers think we need to be?'"

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Service (CMS) requires participating long-term care facilities to use QAPI.

Companies can download a Process Tool Framework1 for implementing each of the process tools which are hyperlinked within the document.

QAPI requires asking basic questions such as what do you expect your organization to do? Information gathering can take the form of auditing what your team is doing. Feedback from these surveys can then enable workers to know how well they're meeting the goals.

Another important aspect of this process is communicating back to the team how well they're meeting goals. Without this feedback, it becomes almost impossible for team members to know for sure how well they're doing.

When Molko discovered fully 40 percent of materials coming back from the Mayo Clinic’s internal laundry for use in surgical packs had to be rewashed, it became imperative to discover the source of this unacceptably high rate.

"We moved into a new laundry and the same issue was occurring there as well," she recalls.

To find a solution, she pulled together a team drawn from the laundry, chemical supplier and the product manufacturer. By bringing them all together, they were able to pinpoint the problem — it was the chemical formula and the wash cycle.

"We tweaked things a little bit at each of the cycles until we were able to achieve a 95 percent usability rate," says Molko. We involved all the players. We had a baseline. We used continuous improvement process to change things and measure how we were doing. We were able to come up with a better outcome that saved money for everyone."

In order for quality processes to continue creating benefits, the organization should appoint a "quality coordinator" within the organization who must continuously collect performance data.

"Having a role like that is very helpful," she says. "I'm also realistic that many smaller facilities or other groups don't have the resources to dedicate to that one function. Having it assigned to someone who is a key stakeholder would be helpful. When you're rolling it out, getting people on the floor who are leads or invested in the process to be key contacts for collecting data or answering questions is very important."

A significant level of improvements can be achieved by including customers in the process. At the Mayo Clinic, Molko's department measured customer complaints. Each call is logged and monitored on a continuous basis.

"If there were any trends or issues that we needed to address, we gave that feedback to our laundry" says Molko. "They also track the number of times we call them and we compare it on a routine basis."

The Lean Process

The Lean process of systematic elimination of waste got its start in the

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auto industry. In the decades since Toyota made it famous, it has become standard in nearly every kind of business. Commercial laundries are no exception. Lean Six Sigma relies on a collaborative team effort to improve performance by systematically removing waste by combining lean principles and Six Sigma.

“Lean has many tools to help you eliminate the waste which requires reworking your plant, which drives up your labor costs, your utility costs, drives up washroom chemical costs,” explains Chip Malboeuf, President at Turn-Key Industrial Engineering Services, Inc. “If you implement or install a Lean philosophy it allows us to drive down costs of our operations. It allows us to increase capacity in our plants.”

Eliminating waste in all its forms – from lost materials to lost labor – is “really what Lean is all about,” says Boyd.

Lean, like other process improvement methods, can be intimidating to the uninitiated. Historically it has been associated with manufacturing and the auto industry and more recently in product development. Yet, its principles can be applied anywhere in any work situation. Perhaps the biggest stumbling block to implementation is its requirement for cultural transformation. In order to be effective it must be applied throughout the organization and requires participation and support from both top and bottom.

“If you don’t have buy-in at the highest level of the organization it’s not going to stick,” asserts Boyd.

Getting started can be as simple as reading a book on the topic. To really make it work requires reaching out to other companies that are using the processes and seeing how they accomplished the implementation. There are also a wide range of formal support organizations and a training system that recognizes expertise with a series of “belts” ranging from green to black. A variety of consulting firms are also available to lead companies through a Lean transformation.

“Where to begin” will be different at each company. Everyone has different pain points and areas of challenge in the work process. Lean provides a number of tools to get started. A high level Value Stream Map lays out what your organization looks like and allows the team to identify the biggest pain points.

A Capacity Analysis Model will identify the theoretical capacity of each department or process in the plant and allows users to identify the constraints in the process.

“It’s not only bottlenecks, but also the anti-bottlenecks,” notes Malboeuf. “That is areas of your plant that you think are in constraint, but the data shows otherwise. As a supervisor or manager I look at this department and the model says we have plenty of machinery. Then you can identify the waste and see what is causing the bottleneck when it’s not a machine constraint.”

Quality programs are not simply limited to the four walls of the plant. To be truly useful they need to reach out to the customers. Gathering and sharing data from customers can lead to better relationships and higher perceptions of quality.

“Educate the customer on the importance of how they treat the textiles and make the textiles so they are laundry friendly,” says Malboeuf. “There are articles that come into the plant
and you say "I'm going to destroy this when I wash it." You have to be careful on linen selection."

Involving the customer creates a partnership instead of just a customer and supplier relationship. The customer becomes involved in the process and that in turn will tend to raise the perception of quality being provided by the supplier.

5S

Other quality practices include 5S, a process for organizing the workplace for efficiency. This method takes its name from five Japanese words: seiri (sort), seiton (set in order), seiso (shine), seiketsu (standardize), and shitsuke (sustain). The decision-making process usually comes from a dialogue about standardization, which builds understanding among employees of how they should do the work. Until the workplace is in a clean, organized state, achieving consistently good results is difficult. A messy, cluttered space can lead to mistakes, slowdowns in production, and even accidents, all of which interrupt operations and negatively impact a company.

The first step of 5S, Sort, involves going through all the tools, furniture, materials, equipment, etc. in a work area to determine what needs to be present and what can be removed. Once there is agreement among workers on the best method for arranging the work area, this organization is standardized to ensure it doesn't become lost in the bustle of everyday work.

Technology

Along with organizational systems, technology has recolonized the laundry industry. Automation has enabled plants to process more materials with fewer workers in less time. Higher levels of efficiency and cost savings are now possible by automating tracking and recording of items as they pass through the laundry.

The use of RFID tags has become more common over the past two decades. The obvious advantages of automatic tracking of items over manual record keeping of different types of laundry items for later entry into a computer system has become increasingly popular. UHF RFID tags designed to withstand commercial laundry processes contain a unique ID number and are attached to each piece to identify specific inventory items.
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Tags are better and more durable than ever, but rolling out a system within a plant isn’t as simple as buying off the shelf. Software must be tailored to the specific operation and companies that make the leap have experienced growing pains.

Halifax Linen Service adopted RFID almost by accident. When a label printer became disabled the company decided it was the time to jump from man-readable to radio frequency technology, says President Preston McElheny.

Developing the software and deploying it throughout plant required six months and a $500,000 investment to implement the system. Despite the struggle, the company recognized a number of advantages for its operations.

“The one advantage that would work well for the customer and for the laundry is the recognition process of true inventory validation,” says McElheny. “It’s come a long way from those days. Literally there was no book on the subject when we did it – especially in linen.”

RFID provided a new level of inventory control for the company. If a towel doesn’t survive its guaranteed number of washings the company knows it and can hold the manufacturer accountable.

Customers benefit from a “max wash” system which alerts operators to pull particular items after they have gone through a certain number of washings for diversion to a quality check.

“We have very high color consistency and high quality colored napery,” notes McElheny. “It prevents defective items from getting to the customer.”

The system also allows the plant to more easily meet quality standards for healthcare facilities.

“If they want a certain test done after a certain time period whether it be a textile item, we can easily write that into our software to do it,” he says.

For companies to become truly successful, they must embrace quality as not just a means to fixing problems, but a daily culture that drives continuous improvement in every area of the operation.