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Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) Save Our People

In today's highly competitive and ever changing health care arena, buzzwords such as performance improvement and total quality management are commonplace. At the heart of each of these programs, SOPs drive the results. As bread is to butter, SOPs literally save our people.

As a practicing health care administrator, I strongly believe it is imperative to develop SOPs for your department. No ifs, ands, or buts. No excuses. If properly developed, SOPs serve as the foundation for your department. It's the difference between efficiency and productivity instead of chaos and confusion.

What is a SOP? Quite simply, a SOP enumerates in writing what should be done, when, where, and by whom. There are numerous benefits of SOPs:

(1) SOPs assist to ensure the quality and congruity of the service. SOPs can abate variances in processes, which can be a barrier to production efficacy and quality control.

(2) SOPs help to assure that best practices are accomplished at all times. For example, staff can coach and support each other if there is documentation available on precisely how different tasks must be completed. SOPs aid in role clarification and help to elude confusion over who is responsible for what task. Furthermore, SOPs yield a viable opportunity to utilize completely the expertise

of all team members and to assist in generating a more cooperative and cohesive team approach to accomplishing daily tasks proficiently.

(3) SOPs can foster continuous evaluation and improvements in work processes.

(4) SOPs are a valuable tool for training new staff, which, in turn, can aid to keep staff safe at work.

The SOP development process is crucial to successful implementation of SOPs. Although developing a complete and comprehensive set of SOPs can be a time consuming and cumbersome process, adequate time spent in the beginning to organize the effort can help decrease frustration with the process and make the effort more effective. Human nature dictates that people support what they help create. Therefore, involving your staff in developing SOPs can help to assure that the final product is comprehensive, purposeful, and accepted.

There are four primary steps to developing a SOP:

(1) First, name your SOP. It is recommended that descriptive action words such as identifying, handling, moving, managing, etc. are used.

(2) Second, develop an outline for your SOP, including which specific tasks will be covered/not covered and for whom the SOP will be written.

(3) Third, describe each task in detail, including the number of people needed for the task, their skill levels, the precise order in which things are done, times allotted, materials and equipment utilized and how

they are utilized, safety considerations, a description of how the completed result should look, and references to other applicable SOPs.

(4) Fourth, be sure to develop a tracking system to monitor the SOP regularly because essentially the minute you write and implement a SOP it is time to evaluate and update it. Moreover, SOPs should be reviewed annually. For obvious reasons, it is advised that a team approach be utilized to change the SOPs.

My own personal preference for a SOP is that it contains two components: one is a flowchart, followed by a step-by-step depiction of the process. Flowcharts are simply a graphic way to present the logical steps in a decision-making process. Furthermore, a flowchart yields an easy-to-follow mechanism for walking a staff member through a series of logical decisions and the required steps that should be taken as a result. Although a weakness of the flowchart format is that the level of detail must be low, on the other hand, flowcharts are best used to yield an overview of a procedure, at the same time paying close attention to logical decisions.

SOPs are powerful tools for mastering control of work processes. They define the fine details that differentiate between success and failure. Moreover, well-written SOPs act as efficacious communication tools that conduce to worker comprehension and job satisfaction. While the SOP development process can be demanding, it can yield considerable performance improvements. Yes, SOPs truly save our people! ⚡



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