

HOW DO YOU APPROACH PROBLEMS?

In an ideal world, everything would run smoothly with only very small bumps in the road – enough to keep us interested but not enough to cause major headaches.

However, as we all know, the world is seldom ideal. We all have ways to deal with problems that arise in our personal lives but what about when something goes wrong in our business?

Having an effective quality system in place means that you should get a heads-up about any issues that arise. But once you detect a problem, what then? How do you discover and address the root cause to make sure it doesn't happen again?

Fortunately, there's a well-established series of steps you can follow.

STEP 1: PROBLEM DETECTED

This can happen through an undesirable outcome or a customer complaint.

STEP 2: INVESTIGATE

Collect all the details of the problem to ensure there is a complete picture.

STEP 3: DETERMINE SIGNIFICANCE

Conduct a risk assessment to determine how significant the problem is. A minor problem can be corrected and closed out. A major one needs further action.

STEP 4: ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS

If your problem is significant, you must drill down to find the root cause.

STEP 5: CORRECTIVE ACTION

Once the root cause is identified, you can plan on how to address the problem and implement corrective or improvement action to avoid repetition.

STEP 6: VERIFICATION

This stage allows you to evaluate if your corrective action had the desired effect. If it did, the case can be closed. If not, you'll need to re-visit the issue beginning with the root cause analysis.

Steps 3 and 4 are critical in this process because they will define the course of your future actions to approach and deal with the problem.

When you determine the significance of a problem you set the importance level and define if it's a superficial problem that can be fixed with a simple action or if this is the peak of a deeper iceberg.

If the significance is incorrect and you judge a problem as being insignificant, you could leave many problems unsolved and the issue will become persistent. If you judge the problem as being significant when it really isn't, you could spend a lot of time and resources on something that can be solved on the spot.

When you've identified a problem as significant, the root cause analysis allows you to delve into the deeper reasons for the problem occurring. There are several methods including the 5 whys, cause and effect or the decision tree.

Of these, the 5 whys is probably one of the better known and used methods. This method requires you to ask 'why did the problem happen' in a focussed way, and answer that question keeping in mind the problem you're investigating. You repeat this process 5 times to determine what is happening at a deeper level. There should be no blame assigned to this exercise – the idea is to find out why something happened not who caused it.

Remember, you don't have to spend your time rushing around putting out fires and trying to deal with every problem that's thrown at you.

However, if you need help with any of these steps, MAS Management Systems is here to support your business to work better and smarter.

You can email info@masmanagementsystems.com.au for support and advice on anything relating to your laboratory business and systems or phone Maree on 0411 540 709.

Remember, you don't have to do this alone!