How to Work With Obstacles (Instead of Giving Up)

It's one thing to say, "Let's build a more human-centred quality system." It's another thing to do that in a real laboratory with real deadlines, real audits, and not enough people. Here are some of the common obstacles and practical ways to tackle them without needing a spare planet.

"We Don't Have Time" – The Busyness Trap

The obstacle

Routine work, urgent samples, and client demands swallow every available minute. Improvement sounds nice in theory, but always loses to "getting today's work out."

Discuss the issue that requires a decision. Include when and where it started and the steps that have been taken by those affected to address it.

How to address it

- **Shrink the ambition, not the intent**
  Start with *tiny* changes: simplify one form, fix one confusing step, run one small trial. A 30-minute improvement that saves 10 minutes a week pays itself back very quickly.
- **Schedule improvement like real work**
  Allocate protected time each month for staff to work on system fixes. If it's not in the roster or schedule, it won't happen.

Legacy Systems That "Sort of Work"

The obstacle

Old SOPs, LIMS workflows and templates technically function, but they're clunky and painful. The risk of breaking something feels higher than the discomfort of leaving it alone.

How to address it

- **“Tackle the worst first” rule**
  Ask staff which procedure causes the most frustration or errors. Start there. You build credibility by fixing what everyone knows is broken.
- **Use controlled pilots**
  Trial a new version with a small group or on a subset of work. If it fails, the impact is limited; if it succeeds, you have evidence to support rollout.

Fear of Rocking the Boat

The obstacle

People worry that criticising the QMS sounds like criticising management, or that raising issues will lead to more work or unwanted attention.

How to address it

- **Invite criticism explicitly**
  Ask, “Which parts of this process make your job harder?” and listen without defending the current system. Make it clear that pointing out problems is part of doing quality work.
- **Act on feedback visibly**
  When someone raises a genuine issue, and you fix it, tell the team: “This change came from feedback from the bench.” That reinforces that speaking up leads to improvements, not trouble.

Compliance Culture Over Learning Culture

The obstacle

The unspoken motto is, “Don’t get a nonconformance,” rather than, “Let’s understand what’s really happening and improve it.” Documents are written for auditors, not for users.

How to address it

- **Reframe nonconformances as information**
  Talk about them as “signals from the system,” not personal failures. Focus your investigation templates on causes and controls, not blame.
- **Write with two audiences in mind**
  Ensure your documents both satisfy the standard *and* make sense to the person at the bench. If staff can’t use it, it’s not a good document, no matter how perfect it looks in an assessment.

Leadership Lip Service

The obstacle

Leaders say quality matters, but day-to-day decisions favour speed, output, or “making the client happy” over doing the job correctly.

How to address it

- **Make trade-offs explicit**
  When pressed for speed, leaders can say, “We’ll do everything we *can* to accelerate, but we won’t skip required checks.” Saying this out loud in front of staff matters.
- **Connect decisions to policy**
  When management backs a quality-first choice, link it to the quality policy and values: “We chose to re-run those samples because reliability is more important than speed.” That’s culture, not just words on the wall.

Over-Engineered Documentation

The obstacle

Procedures are long, dense, and full of jargon. Everything is technically covered. Nothing is easy to follow on a busy day.

How to address it

- **Introduce layered guidance**
  Pair long SOPs with short, visual quick-guides at the point of use: flowcharts, checklists, or one-page “Don’t Panic” summaries with the first critical steps.
- **Apply a “bench test”**
  Have someone unfamiliar with the document try to follow it step by step. Wherever they hesitate, ask questions, or go off-script, that’s where you simplify or clarify.

Siloed Quality Teams

The obstacle

Quality is seen as “the people who do NATA and paperwork,” not as partners in making the work easier and safer.

How to address it

- **Embed quality into operations**
  Involve quality staff in method development, troubleshooting, and daily stand-ups, not just audits and document control.
- **Share ownership of improvements**
  When a process is improved, list both operational and quality staff as co-owners. That signals that the system belongs to everyone.

Change Fatigue

The obstacle

New methods, new software, restructures, accreditation assessments – staff feel like everything is always changing. Even good ideas get lumped into “one more thing.”

How to address it

- **Be selective and transparent**
  Be clear about which changes truly matter now, and which can wait. Explain why a particular change has been prioritised – risk, safety, client impact, or staff pain points.
- **Stabilise where you can**
  When a process is working well, resist the urge to tinker. Stability in some areas makes the necessary change easier to absorb elsewhere.

Lack of Skills in Human-Centred Design

The obstacle

Most lab and quality professionals are experts in methods, statistics, and standards – not in facilitation, user-experience, or human factors.

How to address it

- **Start small with simple tools**
  Use straightforward techniques: process mapping with staff, “walk-through” exercises, and before-and-after comparisons of steps and time. You don’t need advanced UX training to ask, “Does this help or hinder?”
- **Build basic capability**
  Short internal sessions on topics like “writing usable procedures” or “running a root-cause discussion without blame” can significantly improve the way you design and review your system.

No Protected Time for Improvement

The obstacle

Improvement is always squeezed into the gaps between urgent tasks. The gaps, naturally, are very small.

How to address it

- **Create regular improvement slots**
  Even 1–2 hours per month per team, reserved for system review and improvement, makes a difference. Treat it like a booked instrument: you wouldn't casually use the GC in someone else's run slot.
- **Tie improvements to measurable benefits**
  Track and share wins: fewer sample mix-ups, reduced rework, smoother audits. When people see that a few hours of improvement time saved many hours of chaos, it becomes easier to justify and protect.

You don't need to remove all these obstacles before you start. You just need to acknowledge them and work with them deliberately.

After all, as any good hitchhiker knows, the universe is rarely tidy – but with the right mindset (and a well-designed towel), you can still travel well.

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

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