

Leadership and Management

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Hello, my name is Bob Martin, Director of Laboratory Systems Development at the International Training and Education Center for Health. One of the questions I'm often asked is, "Why do laboratory directors and supervisors need leadership and management training." Most people find it easy to understand that laboratories are places where technical scientific knowledge is applied to provide test results, so they tend to see everything through that lens of laboratory science – test tubes and microscopes. They have a more difficult time understanding that there are leadership and management responsibilities that are key to the operation of a highly functioning laboratory.

So what are some of those management responsibilities and how do they differ from leadership responsibilities? I'll quickly review some of the management responsibilities – those activities necessary for the laboratory operations. Remember that a laboratory director must address all of those issues that we called the Quality System Essential.

I won't remind you of all of the QSE's but let me review a few just to point out the magnitude of the laboratory director's management responsibilities.

- **Management of personnel** - for example, assuring job descriptions have been written for each position in the laboratory, and that competency evaluations are performed.
- **Purchasing & Inventory Control** – assuring there is a system for obtaining quality reagents and maintaining an inventory of essential supplies.
- **Process Control** – under this heading we included specimen management, quality control and proficiency testing. It is the laboratory director's responsibility to assure that specimen collection and shipment information is available for those who collect and ship specimens, that adequate supplies of quality control material are available for every test performed in the laboratory, and that there is some process for demonstrating the laboratory's ability to get the correct results, such as participation in a proficiency testing program.
- **Documents and Records** – it's the laboratory director's responsibility to assure there is a system for maintain up to date documents (e.g., standard operating procedures) and that there is a system for maintaining records (e.g., quality control records, patient reports, competency evaluations, as so on.)
- **Facilities and Safety** – a laboratory director is responsible for assuring a safe environment for performance of the work and assuring that personal protective equipment are available and used properly.

Laboratory Leadership and Management in the Clinical Laboratory

In order to accomplish many of these responsibilities, a laboratory director must also have leadership skills – for example assuring adequate staffing of the laboratory requires interactions with both employees in the laboratory to examine and accurately determine workload and requires interaction with those probably outside the organizational structure of the laboratory who have responsibility for establishing and funding new positions.

Leadership skills, then, are necessary both within the laboratory and external to the laboratory.

Within the laboratory leadership is not only about managing tasks, but leadership is also about providing a vision and work environment for your laboratory that encourages the best possible application of skills by laboratory professionals. Those of us who are directors or supervisors are setting the expectation of professional practice in the laboratory and we are responsible for establishing an environment that motivates staff to implement quality practices necessary to provide the kind of testing required by international standards.

Laboratory directors also have a leadership role external to the laboratory. In my former role as a laboratory director in the Michigan Department of Health laboratory, my role was to represent the laboratory to our various ‘customers’ – to local health departments, physicians, nurses, sanitarians, hospitals, professional organizations in the state as well as to represent the laboratory to others in our Department of Community Health (for example to personnel managers, financial staff, maintenance staff and program staff), and to Federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control. I also had to deal with State and Federal laboratory inspections to meet regulatory requirements for accreditation, because in the US, the laboratory director is the person ultimately responsible for the laboratory’s performance.

So when I accepted the job as a laboratory director, I recognized that my time in the laboratory addressing technical issues would be limited – I may continue be involved in directing research or dealing with quality assurance issues in the laboratory, but I needed to recognize that I was giving up that part of my work that directly addressed testing. I needed to rely on others so issues such as delegation, interpersonal skills and other leadership and management skills became critically important.

Applying those skills effectively is key to development of a highly functioning laboratory.