

What is Our STANDARD



6 STARTER
QUESTIONS

What is Our Standard? 6 Starter Questions

The word “*Standard*” is not new to anyone but sometimes, when used in the workplace, it can cause misunderstanding regarding the meaning and intent of the word. The *purpose* of this article is to establish a common understanding of the concept of work standards and to explore six questions that can help an operations manager better define the current condition of their work systems. We will begin with establishing a common definition of the word “Standard”.

STANDARD: According to Webster’s dictionary the word standard means: “a level of quality or attainment”; “an idea or thing used as a measure, norm, or model in comparative evaluations”; “something set up and established by authority as a rule for the measure of quantity, weight, extent, value, or quality”. As we look further into the etymology of the word we see similar phrases: “Weight, measure, or instrument by which accuracy is determined” or “authoritative or recognized exemplar of quality or correctness”.

It is easily recognized that variation in job skills between team members can create differences in the outcomes of the work. Most people do not set out to deliberately work differently compared to other team members. However, when team members were taught differently, or when they were forced to “figure it out on their own” then work variation is inevitably introduced. Each individual forms their own habits & routines over time. When individuals’ habits vary too much in their method, then the outcome of the work will also vary according to each team member’s technique. This variation in work contributes to variations in outcomes and in the frequency of mistakes, errors, poor quality, and even employee or patient injury.

The word **standard** can be used to describe the agreed upon best way for multiple team members to perform specific work elements in order to get the best possible result. The ultimate achievement is the

development of fully **“Standardized Work”**. This is the most refined level of common task documentation and hence performance. Standardized work includes step-by-step guidance, instructions, images and time allocations for the entire task to be completed. It has three basic elements: content, sequence, and timing. Standardized work will produce standard outcomes. Variation from standard work produces variation in outcomes.

There are many work processes in healthcare that are amendable to development of standardized work. One might consider the process of drawing a blood culture from a central line. The variation in the required tasks of drawing blood cultures from a central line can be minimized dramatically using standardized work. However, other work processes in healthcare may not be appropriate candidates for development of standardized work due to the vast variability among patients and procedures. Consider the medical management of the patient with congestive heart failure. These patients present with nearly infinite variations in disease burden and existing co-morbidities to be candidates for standardized work by cardiologists. Order sets, guidelines and clinical protocols can however, provide care structure that, while NOT standardized work, can still add significant benefit by eliminating **unnecessary care variation**. Healthcare providers should be encouraged to develop standards as a way to engage the work force by creating a stable, uniform platform for ongoing performance improvement. This platform serves as the foundation for PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, and Adjust). It is the ongoing work of performance improvement that inspires great creativity. Additionally, corporate focus on performance improvement demonstrates respect for the individual, and encourages scientific thinking as team members search for ways to improve the work that leads to better outcomes. This improved work process generates a **NEW standard** that delivers reliably better results/outcomes.

Supervisors must completely understand the work. Managers need to observe the work closely, first to ensure safety and secondly to ensure effectiveness. Once safe and effective work is occurring, then management and the team members can focus energy on building efficiency, improving quality, and engaging in structured problem solving. Senior managers need to take the time to understand what **standardized work** really is and how it can be used, in certain circumstances, to better achieve their objectives. Attainment of every high level objective depends upon how team members on the front lines perform her/his work.

You will notice this document is not attempting to speak about the “How’s” of standardized work but to initially focus on the “What” and allow leaders to ask some simple questions to discover what is occurring at the *gemba* (actual place where value-creating work actually occurs). Business pioneers, engineers, and scientists throughout time in various industries have said in their own words that without standards there is no progress/improvement.

The 6 Starter Questions

When you initially need to troubleshoot a process, you might consider the six starter questions below. Once you have a clear “YES” to every question then proceed to the next question. If you are not able to have a clear “YES” then more questions will develop hence the word “Starter”.



Question 1: Is there a clear standard for the *outcome*?

If you don't have a clear expectation of what “good” looks like then your definition of “not good” is subjective and varies depending on who, what, and when things are being measured. If the answer to question 1 is NO then define the following:

- a) What are you trying to accomplish from the “customer’s” (patient’s) perspective? What does “good” look like? How do you know?
- b) How does the team member performing the work or the leader observing the work know (and verify) that accomplishment of the work objective/outcome has been “met” or “not met” each and every time?
- c) The character of the work output should include assessment of performance against a target takt-time (standard time to complete) as well as against the physical or quality expectations for the work product.
- d) What do you want the team member to do if he/she finds a problem? What is your process for escalation or response?

Question 2: Is there a clear standard for the *method* that will achieve the standard outcome?

If as an organization or work team we don't know how to reliably achieve the standard outcome, then we are relying on luck. If the answer to question 2 is NO, then define the following:

- a) What steps must be performed, in what order, to get the outcome you expect? This may be a good time to engage TWI Job Methods (JM). Remember the standard at this point is just a deliberate and specific experiment with a specific outcome.
- b) What are the content, sequence, and timing of the work elements to give the desired outcome?
- c) How will the team member doing the work or leadership observing the work know (and verify to themselves) that the method was either “applied” or “not applied” according to your standard method – each time?
- d) What do you want the team member to do if he/she can't or didn't carry out the process as defined? What is your process for escalation or response?

Question 3: Are the conditions required for success present?

Team members have to improvise and compromise if they do not have the time, tools, materials, environment that are required to execute the process as designed. If the answer to question 3 is NO, then define the following:

- a) What conditions must exist for your standard method to work?
- b) What conditions must exist to enable the team member to consistently execute to the standard with no work-around?
- c) How will you assure that the conditions exist prior to process execution each time?
- d) What stops the process from proceeding if the required conditions do not exist?

Question 4: Can you execute to the standard without meaningful variation?

If you have defined the standard method, and assured that the conditions required for success exist, then you must examine what other factors are causing process variation which affects the outcome in any measurable way. If the answer to question 4 is NO, then take the following actions:

- a) CONFIRM that standard conditions exist. If necessary, then correct or restore the standard operating conditions. Next, check for process stability.
- b) CHECK for other conditions which might affect execution. If needed, establish new standard conditions. Finally, one must verify process stability (this can be done with a simple process behavior chart).
- c) CONFIRM a clear understanding of the standard method. In question 2, if you used TWI JM, it may reveal the need for TWI Job Instruction (JI). This may be a perfect time to engage in TWI Job Instruction (JI) to facilitate creating a standard practice among the team members.
- d) CONFIRM that there is strong commitment and cooperation from the workforce to following the standards. If there is resistance or reluctance to following standards, this will be an opportunity to engage TWI Job Relations (JR) to develop or rebuild relationships with people in order to get their cooperation and dedication in doing the work following the standards.
- e) Define and identify the point where process execution varied and flag this step as a potential mistake-proofing opportunity. These flagged opportunities will point the team members toward work processes in need of focused improvement.

Question 5: Was a standard method followed and were the results (outcomes) as expected?

After we have verified process stability, then we can evaluate to see if the process that we specified actually works as we predicted. If the process is not working as predicted and the answer to question 5 is NO, then take the following actions:

- a) REEXAMINE your standard method and conditions.
- b) IDENTIFY process failure points as potential sources of variation.
- c) ADJUST the process to address those failure points thereby reducing sources of variation.
- d) REPEAT until your process is consistently performing to the standard outcome.

Question 6: Does everything work OK, but you want or need to do better?

Only a stable baseline can tell you how well you are performing today. Then you can assess if you need changes. If changes are necessary, then start once more with question 1. The fun starts all over again!