



# Contrarian Wisdom

By Clay Sherman

## Whose Standards? Mom's or The Joint Commission's?

Chicken. It's what we used to say to our buddies on the playground when they wouldn't jump from the jungle gym. One of the things you learned back then was that it wasn't cool to hang too far back, that risk and achievement would forever be part of life's equation.

Speaking of chicken, word is, there's going to be a change at the helm at The Joint Commission. I truly wish the new CEO the very best at shaking things up, but I'm not going to hold my breath. This moribund organization has too long acted as a drag to change. I've had a longstanding "thing" about the questionable stuff The Joint Commission has done, like ORYX and mandating TQM before there was industry readiness for it (TQM's subsequent 85% failure rate wasted millions hospitals could ill afford). The concept that someone from the outside should prescribe a fix for your shop just doesn't work for me. They just don't get it—management is not about meeting minimal standards, it is about creating excellence in outcomes, a joyful workplace, and "wow" service.

Are you really proud to get some outsider's accreditation? Then go out on the front lawn and post a sign that reads: We Meet Minimal Standards! Use that logic when picking a place to eat or a new boyfriend for your daughter, and see how it works for you.

Standards. Whose got 'em? Everybody does. This industry needs to rely on some new standards sources and stop the insanity of thinking that the minimal standards set by The Joint Commission are going to get you to the winners' circle. Better standards sources:

**Your inner voice.** Your standards can be precisely located by pointing your index finger between your eyes. What's up there? On a good day, mom's voice, or your personal values. And maybe the desire to really do something of significance. Are you here to follow somebody else's standards, or are you here to set standards? Ask your management team, "How good are we on a scale of 1 to 10?" The answers are always a shocker, and it reveals the dissatisfaction people feel between their personal standards and what's going on at the organization.

**Competitive benchmarks.** Thankfully, a ton of hospital leaders are going for their balanced scorecard numbers, Top 100 status, Press Ganey ratings, and an infinitude of other prizes and markers. The games have begun and the race is on. Are you keeping up? Until better measures are out there, keeping up with some of the champion runners will at least keep you in the race. According to a report released by HealthGrades, "the top 5% of US hospitals are pulling away from the pack" in terms of improvements in risk-adjusted patient mortality and complication rates from 2002 to 2004. Patients undergoing common inpatient procedures at the best hospitals had a 27% lower average risk of dying in the hospital and a 14% lower risk of complications than at other hospitals, based on an analysis of Medicare data.

**Today's standard.** While the industry sits around sucking its thumb about why it can't produce a comprehensive electronic patient record, Microsoft announced in October the introduction of HealthVault, hoping to do for medical records what it did with Office—create the de facto standard. The fact is that regulatory groups set fewer standards than the free market. By actual count, more standards are set by an individual company's customer product preferences (Apple's iPod, Starbucks) and industry consortia agreements (USB, Wi-Fi) than are set by regulators. While we could use a more sensible approach to standards management, don't miss the boat to set today's standard.

Ultimately, incorporating standards represents a test of competence and capability. That can be a dreaded event—a jump from the jungle gym—because passing any worthwhile standard means work, change, and risk.

But if the test is worth passing, it can be a sign of excellence. Think of it as winning an Olympic medal. Citius, altius, fortius—swifter, higher, stronger. This is your day on the track. Do you want to pass some minimal, just-getting-by standard, or do you hear mom's voice saying, "You can do it, dear." ■

*Clay Sherman, drclay@GoldStandardManagement.org, is the author of Gold Standard Management and Creating the New American Hospital. A member of the Healthcare Management Hall of Fame, Clay provides extensive free resources of organization high performance materials at [www.GoldStandardManagement.org](http://www.GoldStandardManagement.org).*