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Quality control systems fail without enforcement from management

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In the decades that I've been working with collision repair businesses, I have seen (and in some cases, helped develop) some excellent quality control programs.

Too often, however, it isn't the lack of such a program that comes back to haunt a collision repair business. It's the failure to FOLLOW the program the shop has developed.

It's not just me who has seen this. I was speaking with someone in senior management at a large collision repair business (not one of my clients) and told him his company has a really excellent quality control system.

"Yeah," he replied, "but nobody uses it."

That's why I believe that quality in today's collision repair industry is a management problem, not a technician problem. It's not an issue of technicians failing to conduct repairs properly; it's an issue of management not using a system to enable and ensure that they do.

Almost every vehicle check-in sheet I see, for example, has a place for radio reset codes to be entered. But all too often they aren't. At a minimum, there should be an "n/a" entered to indicate the codes won't be necessary for that particular job. But I tell shops if you're not going to mandate that every box be filled on a form, don't include that box on the form. This helps teach your staff that every box requires input on every job.

I was in a shop recently where a technician was repairing a fairly new BMW. He had installed a new quarter-panel on it, and it looked beautiful. The welds were awesome. When I asked the technician if he'd had the OEM procedure, he could produce it immediately from his toolbox. All is good, right?

That is until I really read the OEM procedure and confirmed my suspicion: BMW calls for that quarter-panel to be bonded and riveted, not welded. I even noticed the technician had a package of rivets on top of his tool box for that job, so clearly the estimator had pulled the OEM information for the job and had known to order the rivets.

So what caused the failure? The technician didn't fully understand some of the symbols in the OEM procedure. He'd welded the panel in the exact places shown in the diagram – only the diagram was indicating where the rivets were to be placed. He said he'd thought the rivets would be used later to secure another part to the vehicle.

The bottom line was the shop had just bought itself a BMW. The estimator had followed the shop's quality control system, but it wasn't followed from that point on, by the technician, the production manager and the paint department, all of which could have prevented the problem by following the shop's quality control system.

The lesson here is to first build a good quality control system. In terms of OEM procedures, for example, the estimator should be required to download them as they prepare the estimate, the technician should be required to sign that he or she read the procedures and will follow them, and the production manager is to sign off that those procedures were followed. That all ends up in the job file.

If a technician will be welding, he or she should first conduct test welds, destruct those test welds, photograph the destructed welds, and upload that documentation to the job file. Similarly, images of the completed welds on the vehicle also should be uploaded to the file.

That's all part of a great system. But management's job doesn't end after building such a system. It has to ensure that system is being consistently followed.