

What SOPs Can Do for Your Collision Shop

Standard operating procedures can help shops maintain professionalism, consistency and efficiency.

My journey into standard operating procedures (SOPs) started when I was in the U.S. Air Force. Imagine how difficult it is to recruit people from all types of upbringings, backgrounds, races and other differences and make them into top functioning members of a unit. We learned procedures. We learned process. We learned about the chain of command. We learned about how each individual plays his or her role and gets the job done by working together.

The Environmental Protection Agency defines SOPs as: "A set of written instructions that document a routine or repetitive activity followed by an organization." The development and use of SOPs are an integral part of a successful quality system as it provides individuals with the information to perform a job properly, and facilitates consistency in the quality and integrity of a product or end result.

SOPs describe both technical and administrative operational elements of an organization. That holds true for any automotive repair facility - mechanical or collision.



My journey into SOPs continued as I began to manage my own business after purchasing it from my father. Years ago, I read the book, *The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It*, by Michael E. Gerber. What an inspiration that book was for me. I urge anyone who owns a business to put this on their "must read" list. After reading this book, I realized that I would never be able to have much of a life unless I was able to train my employees to do their jobs the way I would do them.

Like many of us in the automotive industry, I worked in the shop before I started managing it. I learned by application what I believed to be the best way to do things. When I took over the management of the shop, I told my employees how I wanted them to do their jobs. I tried to establish what my expectations were and how I wanted customers to be treated.

That approach met with mediocre results at best. As much as I wanted consistent performance from my employees, they often did their own thing or didn't understand what I was trying to convey. I often didn't explain why I wanted them to do things a certain way. I realized later that was a big mistake.

We also had a hard time finding technicians. I know I'm not alone in that. Nearly all of us have struggled with our human resource needs. The learning curve for our apprentices was steep. I knew that SOPs could be a great way to speed up the process of training our new people, but I had to get those procedures out of my head and begin documenting them on paper.

I started in the parts department. Once I completed SOPs for that part of our operation, I hired a new parts guy. I asked him to read over the SOPs so he would understand what I wanted him to do. I told him, "Forget what you have done in the past, this is what I want you to do here as my Wagonwork Collision Center parts specialist." In just 60 days he was doing great. His parts ordering process was consistent and the errors - that had been a weakness of our parts operation in the past - were cut to a bare minimum. The new parts guy was a fan of the SOPs that were provided to him, and that sold me on how effective SOPs could be throughout my organization.

Sure enough; as written SOPs were added into the various elements of my operations, we saw improvements. My success rate with new hires increased dramatically. People who would come to work for me needed to know what was expected of them. Existing staff members were doing a better job of following procedures as well, and the consistency of our overall operations improved. Only then did I see people doing things the way I used to do them. I was seeing the kinds of results coming from nearly all of my people as if I was doing it myself. What a great feeling that is!

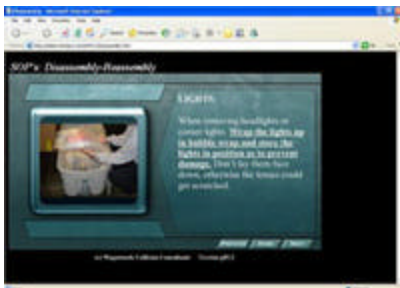


I have been working on SOPs for 10 years now. Initially I wrote them down and told my staff, "This is how we are going to do things around here from now on." That method was OK, but I found that if I got my employees involved in the process, it would really take off and produce dramatic results. When your employees participate in an endeavor, it's easier for them to take ownership of it. By owning it, they help train new people and they hold each other accountable.

To get our employees involved, we initially held a big meeting. We rented a hotel meeting room, served lunch and hammered out SOPs all day long. During the day, I knew some employees were buying into this new way of doing business, and some were not. I told them that I knew not everyone who participated that day would be around in a year. It wasn't that somebody was necessarily right or wrong; it just wasn't going to work for some. I wanted them all to search deep within themselves and decide if they were on board or not. I lost about four out of 20 employees. Sometimes when you get the right people on the bus, the wrong people must get off. This was a natural way of seeing that through.

One of the difficult challenges in our industry is that, while it is easier to create SOPs for the administrative side of things, it is much tougher to do on the technical side. Every vehicle is different. Therefore, you have to have broader SOPs in place, which can serve as basic guidelines to follow. You can still continue to do certain things the same way, but we have to be flexible, within certain parameters, on other areas of our operations. In the last two years or so, I have come to the conclusion that having SOPs in written form simply isn't enough. We began working with a company called Select Tech (www.selecttechpro.com) to put our SOPs into a more deliverable form. We now have our SOPs on CD.

Now, with our SOP CDs, in addition to text, we have added photos, video and audio narration. Our SOP CDs even include hyperlinks to our forms. Rather than sitting down and reading a bunch of text, my employees are interactive participants in their own learning. Doing this, we are able to hit multiple learning styles and our SOPs are driven home that much more effectively.



It's also important to have some way to audit whether or not your employees are following through on your SOPs to the degree that you would like them to. If employees know that you are going to be randomly checking whether or not they are following the shop's SOPs, they will be much more likely to follow through on their part all of the time.

Team Involvement

Earlier I mentioned that one of the mistakes I made in the beginning was not explaining why I wanted things done a certain way. Having a culture where your teams buy into the system requires that they understand why a process or procedure is what it is. You have to build in the why factor. Once employees understand that there is good reasoning behind our methods, they are more able to fully implement SOPs for you.

SOPs are a living entity. They need to be reviewed regularly and updated as needed. This job belongs to your staff. You can facilitate it, but let your staff work things out. You should do this at least annually. We do it quarterly.

We have SOPs in every phase of our operations, including:

- ? Job Profiles and Descriptions
- ? Complete Shop Management System
- ? Administrative
- ? Disassembly/Reassembly
- ? Parts Department
- ? Collision Department
- ? Mechanical Department
- ? Refinish Department
- ? Shop/Vehicle Steward
- ? PPE/Safety/Hazardous Material
- ? Tools - Refinish, Mechanical, Collision

Through my consulting business, I have now made these SOPs available to other shops in the industry for a fee, giving them a fully customizable template to follow. This saves them hundreds of hours of time and takes advantage of my 10 years of experience with SOPs. We suggest that a shop that starts with our template should run these suggested SOPs by their staff, get their input and buy-in, make the suggested changes and then begin full implementation.

SOPs give us what I call "verifiable trust." My insurance company partners need to know they can trust us and that we are going to be consistent in our operations even if we have multiple facilities. By showing them our SOPs - including how we train and test our employees on SOPs, how we audit whether or not they are following them - we earn their trust. Our insurance partners don't have to worry about what happens if there is an employee change. They can rest assured that the new person is going to be taught how to do their job exactly the same way the former employee did. SOPs have cut our comeback work dramatically. We have very few re-dos.

Without SOPs, we would have a shop full of independent contractors doing things the way they want to. With SOPs, we have a fully functioning team pulling in the same direction, providing consistent quality repairs and exceptional customer service. They do things the way I want them to!

SOPs can change the world within your four walls if you have the will and commitment to getting them down on paper or in some other deliverable format, like the CDs we have created and made available to shops in the industry for purchase. SOPs have the ability to help your shop run on its own, more dependent on systems rather than on people left to their own devices. Once in place and fully implemented, the need for your constant oversight becomes lessened. The book I mentioned earlier, *The E-Myth Revisited*, puts it best: "It is the system, not only the people, that will differentiate your business from everyone else's. ... To create a world of our own. It's nothing more than a flight from the world of chaos 'out there' into a world of our own. It's a yearning for structure, for form, for control."

Who's with me? Let's go!

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