



**“The Goal is Zero – The Target is Improvement”
July 2011**

For about a year now, several members of our team have been having conversations about what is possible, what is likely, and how we use the words “goal” and “target.” Much of this started when we had a conversation with Paul O’Neill, U.S. Treasury Secretary from 2001-2002 and former Alcoa CEO. Paul was insistent to the point of almost being annoying! He kept saying, “The goal must be zero.” A key principle of lean is clear and unambiguous communication...so let me try to make this clearer.

I and others responded with statements like:

- How can that be when we are hoping to achieve 10, 20 or even 50 percent improvements in our work?
- When our starting point falls short of perfect, say we are at a 90 percent rate which amounts to a 10 percent defect rate or 100,000 defects per million (dpm), decreasing that 100,000 dpm by 10-50 percent per year will get us to zero only after a very, very, very long time.
- How disillusioning it will be to set a goal of zero when we will never get close to this!
- Are you nuts?

Then Paul shared a story with us about when he began as the CEO of Alcoa. They had an annual employee injury rate of two-per-thousand. He said the goal must be zero and his team told him he was nuts. He went to a plant and told the employees that the goal is zero and they told him he was nuts. So, in a plant of a thousand people he asked a simple question, if the goal is not zero, who here today will raise their hand and volunteer to get a significant injury this year so we hit a higher goal? No one raised their hand.

Here at ThedaCare a team recently spent a week to reduce the rate of surgical site infections after total joint replacements. They established a target of a 50 percent reduction from our current rate of one per month which is at, or slightly better than, the national average. That sounds like a great target and a lot of work. The report changed when a customer named Rosie who was on the event shared her story of surgical site infection. Rosie has had seven surgeries over the past two years. She is unable to drive a car and she may need her knee fused, which would mean that she would not be able to drive ever again, at least not using her right leg on the pedals.

So even if the target is 50 percent reduction over the next twelve months, can we all agree that the goal is zero? Zero defects, zero dpm, zero wound infections. And if this sounds too tough, who is willing to volunteer to have a post joint replacement wound infection this coming year so that we hit our goal?

To me, this goal of zero is very motivating because it reminds all of us of what we would want for ourselves, our families and friends. Yes, it is very daunting and we will not get there as quickly as we might like. In fact, for some of our work we might never get to zero. But by choosing the right goal we will work like heck to improve our performance year over year and achieve progress that we otherwise might never dream of. So to be clear and unambiguous, the goal is zero defects and the target is improvement. Let’s use these words properly as we go forward so we know what each other is talking about.

And as we do this work, let’s smile a little bit and enjoy the ride. We have much work ahead and we would be wise to maintain our positive attitudes while we redouble our efforts. Thanks for all of your hard work each and every day to deliver better value to our patients and community.

Until next month – Dean