

*The Checklist Manifesto*

By  
Atul Gawande

*The Checklist Manifesto* by Atul Gawande is subtitled “How to Get Things Right.” After reading the book, I thought that anyone involved in any kind of organization or any position where you have to work with other people should read this book. Gawande’s principle is simple: a clear, usable checklist helps people remember steps to be taken, routine steps that could be easily overlooked. Since Gawande is a surgeon, he is obviously most interested in medical applications of a checklist, but he turns to other arenas, particularly aviation, for models of workable ones.

One of his interesting aviation stories deals with Captain “Sully” Sullenberger and the astonishing landing of a US Airways flight on the Hudson River. I had seen Sully on television a couple of times, and each time, he said that the safe landing had been a team effort. However, the press apparently needed this man to be the hero despite his disclaimers. Sully was a crucial part of this experience, but Gawande suggests that one of the reasons that things happened as they did was because there were checklists of things to do which included how to try to restart an engine in flight. The three flight attendants also knew what to do and in what order which also contributed to the safety of all aboard.

Gawande wondered if checklists could be successfully used in surgery to prevent some of the most common mistakes. After reading this, if I need surgery, I’m going to ask if they have a checklist. Some interesting things emerged as Gawande was able to organize a pilot program in eight hospitals around the world from some of the best

equipped in wealthy countries to some very poorly equipped in very poor areas. The checklists that surgeons were given were works in progress and could be changed to adapt to their particular hospitals. Generally, the checklist of 17 or 18 items was divided into three parts: before anesthesia, before incision and before leaving the OR (to do things like count sponges!). The sections ideally would each take about a minute to do. As the checklists were used, it became apparent that a nurse was the best choice to manage the list which also did not invest all the power in the OR in the surgeon. Another, perhaps surprising, aspect was that people in the OR were to introduce themselves and share information before the actual surgery began.

Gawande candidly admits that he was less than excited about doing this himself in his OR, but the results there and in the eight hospitals were staggering. The results after a three-month period showed that the rate of major complications fell by 36% with the use of a checklist. Even so, there were still surgeons and other hospital personnel who didn't think the checklist was necessary. However, when they were asked if they would want their surgeon to use a checklist if they were having operations, 93% of them said, "Yes."

We live in a complex world with complex tasks to perform, and no one can remember everything one hundred percent of the time. A well-developed, well-used checklist can help and, in some cases including surgery, can save lives.

*The Checklist Manifesto* is published by Metropolitan Books, a division of Henry Holt, and retails for \$24.50.