The Human Side of Quality: Why Any System is Only as Strong as the Least Competent Operator

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When I was much younger and worked as the Director of Quality Systems for a well-known manufacturer of road building equipment, I was tasked by the President of the organization with the implementation of the ISO 9001 Quality Management Standard for the Company of about 350 employees. This was in the early 1990's and the Standard in those days was considered to be an elemental standard as compared to the process-oriented standard we have today. What I mean by an elemental standard is that it was comprised of 20 sections (or elements) which would need to be implemented throughout the organization. Although in theory these elements were interactive, in practicality they became silos and as divisive as the early management systems (Gilbreath, 1911) which divided companies into departments.

Of course, I was relatively young then and full of energy so I dived into the planning. First, I scheduled the Lead Auditor Training, never thinking of anyone else but me and how important it was for me to understand the standard. So, given this state of mind, I didn't think anyone else should attend the training besides me. I went to the training and immediately became a student of the standard. I had the elements memorized and the plan to implement in hand.

The plan to implement included initial awareness training for the whole organization, the formation of a steering committee, a project management schedule, a periodic reports schedule to keep management apprised of the progress, the choosing of a registrar, the beginnings of the internal audit plan, the plan to develop the required documents, and the final preparation plans for the certification audit.

But, I was quickly informed by the President and his staff that this whole "ISO thing" was not their idea, this brainchild of the corporate management was "my baby" for implementation. They did not see the need for their involvement. In fact they became perturbed that there might be reasons to pull people off jobs for information gathering and some training and that I was to ensure those kinds of activities would be held to a minimum. And, I needed to understand, failure to achieve certification was not an option.

So, my staff and I set out to get the job done. We wrote the Quality Policy Manual and the system procedures and work instructions. We tried to build on what we already had, but many of those documents were so outdated or non-existent, so the work load was formidable. We held daily meetings each morning and plotted our progress. My small team acted as the implementation team as well as the steering committee and the reporting committee, and oh, by the way, these efforts had to be accomplished alongside their normal daily activities and responsibilities.

We stayed to the timeline and reported our progress at each monthly Business Review meeting. Each month the senior staff would listen but gave little reaction to what we discussed and pretty much acted as if the whole process was non-value-added, but necessary since Corporate said we had to do it. At no time did any individual manager take on the responsibility to report on how implementation was going within his/her own department. They saw those activities as the responsibilities of the Quality Group. As we drew closer to the final certification audit the senior group energized to a certain extent when I told them they would be interviewed concerning the intent of the standard and what it will mean to the future of the Company. Each one of them became more interested in spending some time with me to discuss these things.

I also found out that we would have an observer from our Corporate headquarters (the VP of Quality) there during the three days of the certification audit. That added pressure when the President took me aside and told me I would be the observer's host along with acting as the Management Representative for the Registrar.

Finally the certification audit day came. The Registrar's representatives were no-nonsense businessmen (all male) who were not given to anything resembling humor. They went right to work auditing the Manual and procedures and then onto auditing the practices per each section of the Standard. It was a long three days. Their audit statements and findings

- The documents were well-written and thorough and met the requirements of the standard;
- The Company postings were adequate and attractive;
- The Quality Group members were extraordinarily informed about the standard and its intent;
- The Senior Staff seemed generally informed but could neither find the Quality Manual nor the other system documents. They did not know the Quality Policy.
- *The workforce appeared under-informed and ignorant of the Standard and its intent. They neither knew the Quality Policy nor the process for finding the documents they needed.* They did seem to follow, in general, the procedures and work instructions, but responded more by memory than by training and ready access.
- When the corrective actions files were audited along with the customer complaint files, the comments were:
    - *The corrective actions files did not have hard evidence that root cause had been determined and that effective corrective actions had been carried out;*
    - *Customer Service Complaint files indicated that the same performance and reliability issues recurred in some cases as many as five times to the same customer after the implementation of the QMS Standard.*
- And, finally, the major finding was that no evidence existed that the QMS Standard had been effectively implemented *within the lowest levels of the organization*, and that the employees seemed ignorant of the intent and details of the requirements of the standard.

No certification of the system was recommended without a submission of corrective actions to the findings.

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A general meeting was held with the Corporate VP of Quality, the Division President and his staff, and me. After a round of finger pointing it became evident that we had adequate system documentation but we had not taken the time (literally) to train the employees on the aspects of the Quality Policies and the rigor of the procedures and work instructions. The Registrar had given us 45 days to answer the findings with corrective actions. It was agreed by all involved that the plan was to immediately start utilizing the system documentation to train all our employees. Because of the Corporation's presence, we took on the tasks with some gusto and for the next 30 days we trained like mad. We submitted our corrective actions with evidence back to the Registrar on the 45th day. The Registrar scheduled a follow- up audit which was passed with flying colors. Their comments were quite complimentary concerning the level of knowledge our employees now had of the Quality Policy, their customers' requirements, how to access documents, and how to follow procedures and work instructions. There were no findings in the follow-up audit and the certificate was granted on the spot.

So, what was the difference? We had a good plan from the onset to define the standard's requirements and translate them into system documents, e.g., manuals, procedures, work instructions, forms, and document control. We had a good handle on management commitment, albeit truncated in political necessity instead of creation of a sense of urgency brought about by the great need for a well- functioning quality management system. The problem was rooted in an age-old belief that the QMS belonged to the Quality Department and, therefore, could be ignored, per se, by all others. Senior management did not see the QMS policies and procedures as integral to their departmental activities and outcomes (a proactive approach) and thus did not integrate or feel responsible for the actual use of the QMS. They also believed that employees are readily replaceable and therefore not value-added. They held onto the age old adage that if the employee was not busy they were not gainfully employed so they did not want to approve off-the-job training to learn the QMS rules. Taking them off their jobs to train them, or to ask their assistance in developing the procedures and work instructions, was thought to be nonsensical when we have other "quality types" that are seen as indirect labor, therefore expendable.

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So, we actually missed the identification as to who really operated the QMS that was delivering the products and services to the customers and left the people who were tasked with carrying out all these system requirements out of the equation. We assumed that they would pick up what had to be done by osmosis, and accept all the changes without objection. We broke the Cardinal rules of implementing change: 1) we did not include them in the development of the changes to be made; 2) we did not consider that they would have to carry out each of the changes; and, 3) we did not consider the impact the changes would have on the daily lives of those they impacted

Since enduring this hard-knocks lesson, I have devoted quite a bit of time to the essential aspect of the system operators and the consequences to the quality of performance of the various components of the QMS if the system operators are not competent in their jobs. I believe that any system, whether Quality or Human Resources, etc., is only as strong as the least competent system operator. Further, if we look at what really happens from day-to-day, we will find that much of the waste we generate within our organizations is the result of incompetency in design, planning, materials selections, measurement, job assignments and individual and group skills thus requiring the "work-a-round's" necessary to serve the customers.

So often the Human Resources aspect of any company is ignored as a major resource to the success of our planning and visions of excellence. And, to be candid, even our processes for recruiting and onboarding our human resources are devalued and under planned from the onset – yes, even from the date of first contact at recruiting - in that we recruit without having accurate and complete job descriptions, well-developed training plans for both on-boarding and skills level development, plus on-going career path development for our employees. We will give the selection and qualification of a supplier of goods and/or services much more in-depth thought and planning than we do the recruiting of our workforce. In short, our human resources, the only asset within the company that can be grown, are left with unclear expectations and systems that allow (thus reward) behaviors which fall short of competence.

As an example, our expectation of doctors is that they know what they are doing when they have a scalpel in their hands and it is aimed at some part of our bodies. As customers, we feel compelled to demand competence from them. So, shouldn't we expect that competence of performance is as essential for the outcomes of any company when the good of any customer is at stake? In many ways we have become accustomed to operating at mediocre levels, allowing for mistakes and shoddy outcomes. I could go on and on, but the point is that competence will equal excellence if it is applied at every step in all processes.

Today I'm in the business of consulting with people who want to implement quality systems. I always introduce my plan for consulting on the implementation or improvement of any process(es) as always including the need to bring the employee groups into the planning process and keep them involved all along the way to full implementation. Everyone has a stake in the success of any moral venture.

Whether you make widgets for a living, or provide services to make life easier and better; or, you are a for-profit or a non-profit organization; you always market that you can do it better than anyone else. Don't let those be hollow words. By involving everyone within your organization in the planning and implementation processes of the changes you make, you value them, and you ensure the success of the changes planned, and, indeed, the change process itself.

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