QMS as a Way of Thinking

Searching for the essence of quality management in simple examples

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The Quality Management System (QMS) exists in one form or another in the production chain of any manufacturing company. Quality management is fairly simple when it comes to making something tangible (that can be touched, weighed or measured). Creating QM rules and implementing QM procedures requires just a little bit of creativity and common sense applied to a concrete manufacturing facility.

The problem of quality is much more blurred when it comes to services (design, information or consulting services, as well as other service products that take about as much time, where the final result is not predetermined). It is even more difficult to talk about quality when it comes to back office processes in any company (e.g., if we view the annual financial report or a commercial offer for the client as the final product). The problem of quality is, nevertheless, especially important when the service provided is of the one-of-a-kind variety.

One of the basic postulates of quality management is as follows. When you do not know the exact parameters of the end product (to assess it at the end of the process), you can be sure of quality only if you monitor all product characteristics in the process of making it.

Let us give you some unconventional examples: "I want a truly *exclusive* advertising project." If the designer works on the project on his or her own, will that guarantee its *exclusive* character? In many ways, yes, but not completely. If the process of intermediate control is in place in the designer's work (sketches, photo sessions), which includes searching for similar models among the competition (at least at the regional level, your sector and over the last couple of years); if someone spends at least one hour a day working on it and the results are presented (as reports on materials studied, similar ideas and color schemes) to you and the designer (in the form of structured feedback), then as you accept the work in three weeks you will say more confidently that your project is exclusive. Should you fail to monitor the *exclusiveness* of your project, you risk stumbling (on your way to your dacha, on the outskirts) into an idea very similar if not better than yours … and that, after having invested in the advertising campaign and placed your banners all over the capital city. This example offers specific measurable parameters for *exclusivity*: it is not just abstract *exclusivity;* it is exclusivity among 1000 similar advertising campaigns undertaken by 5 competitors over the past 2 years. You cannot directly control *exclusivity*, but you can control the regularity and completeness of the report on the models studied.

Or here's a more down-to-earth example: "I want every client who comes to our website to get a return call from our sales manager *as soon as possible*." Naturally, you must begin with defining what *ASAP* means. For example, within two hours after the website visit. Let us ask the IT person how soon will the inquiries placed online reach us, and whether he or she monitors daily how this KPI is performing. Let's imagine that he (or she) does, i.e. every morning sends a test message while drinking coffee and checks hosting messages over the past 24 hours. Let's say the inquiry reaches the office manager's mailbox in no more than 15 minutes. What does the office manager do with these letters? Apparently, he or she attaches these letters to the internal workflow system and redirects them to someone from the sales department. To whom? That person must be appointed by the Commercial Director of the branch. And whoever it might be, he or she should, in theory, give the client a call. Therefore, the calling back process (as in this example) involves at least four employees: the IT person, the office manager, the Commercial Director and a senior sales manager in the branch office. Let's say it will take the office manager 45 minutes to process the request in the document management system, and then it takes a sales person one hour to place a call. You will then have to come up with a simple reporting and motivation system to control the actions of each of these staff members in the process of calling the client back. In our example, you must also require that your Commercial Director send you a weekly screen shot of the corporate portal or a photo with the schedule of on-duty managers. The Commercial Director must also require daily logs of customer calls completed by managers to be submitted to him or her daily via e-mail.

The QMS is not a system that exists somewhere in the near circle of the general manager exclusively for him or her. The QMS determines the manager's thinking patterns.

Now, what is the certification of QMS according to ISO, which has been so trendy in the early 2000's and now has become little more than a tribute to all the effort put in by the company? It is all very simple: an auditor comes in and studies the process to be certified (say, production of exclusive advertising materials or calling back clients, as in our examples). Then the auditor studies the company's internal documentation and checks all instructions, templates, quality records and those responsible for compliance with quality standards. When something is amiss, the auditor tells you so. You correct your documentation (e.g., amend the Office Manager's job description to read: "1. Maintain, in coordination with the Commercial Director a calendar of Sales Department on-duty managers in each branch; know which of the managers is on duty at any given time. 2. Upon receiving a genuine website request, transmit it within 45 minutes to the on-duty manager via the internal workflow system. 3. ..." In the motivation statement for the Payroll Accountant you will enter: "1. When calculating the bonus received by the Office Manager, consider the average time it took the OM to assign tasks to the on-duty manager. Bonuses should be paid only if no less than 96% of all notifications have been made within 45 minutes and with an average time of notification of no more than 40 minutes." The General Manager shall approve the report form on the mean time of assigning tasks to the manager on duty. You will agree that these points in the instructions for the office manager and the accountant are needed not for the auditor and ISO Certificate; they are essentially important, first and foremost, for you. When these points are absent, the value of the ISO Certificate will not exceed its printing costs. Do not expect too much from the auditor. A stranger for your company can hardly be expected to provide a most optimal solution for your business and your people. Do not expect him to tell you that the loudness of the ring tone is not as important as picking up the phone as soon as possible, or advise your commercial director that the on-duty schedule must be photographed onto his or her mobile phone. The auditor will only check whether your QMS is understood by everyone and whether it works in practice.

After checking all the critical processes for your business (at the first stage you may want to select the truly critical ones so as not to overexert yourself or incur extra costs), and making sure that the control measures are in fact implemented, you will be surprised to find out that the ISO certificate is no longer important for you. It is more important for you to understand that the parameters of the service that you provide are being controlled, which makes your service *high quality* in that sense. You will see that your company's external environment will positively assess the quality of the parameters you have been monitoring. Sooner or later, you will hear something like, "Well, they always respond very quickly..." or "Their layouts, they may not be outstanding, but they are always unforgettable!". These words will be better than any certificate for you. As a result of the work you do, you will receive very concrete and easily assessable conditions for the new automated system you are planning to introduce in your company, and that will help you cut future costs.

P.S. How do we tell if a quality management system is indeed in place in your company? The answer, we believe, is as follows: if your office manager complains that "she works fine yet delays her projects all the time, for which fact she was stripped of the quarter bonus when she achieved only 90% instead of 96% in some report!" and on every Friday you get a text message with the schedule for the week from the Commercial Director, then you can say that your Quality Management System is in place.