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Integrating Quality within the Fabric of an Organization

Written by: Phil Ventresca, MBA

As a consultant specializing in quality improvement and project management, I am often asked to define the roles of quality assurance, quality control and R&D in an organization's quality culture. I have found that functional departments tend to operate within a structure of process and protocol. Quality assurances are executed between multiple measurement techniques such as: performance programs, financial goals, sales goals and productivity scales. The aforementioned measurables are less tangible than more stringent quality controls as found in hard goods or product manufacturing environments. Keeping both of these approaches separate but related is a task that challenges even the most skilled practitioner. However, it is mission critical to the quality effort.



In addition to the inherent difficulties associated with disseminating quality assurance and quality control, adding R&D magnifies the complexity. R&D is not necessarily a finite process yet it possesses many similar qualities. Utilizing standard controls can be difficult and many times inhibitive. Nevertheless, I have seen many organizations fall short on R&D initiatives because the product expectations and quality standards were sacrificed for time to market concerns. This situation clearly illustrates the need to utilize both quality assurance and quality control techniques. In order to accomplish this merger, the organization must support an enterprise-wide belief and commonality toward the concepts of quality and excellence.

Quality assurance is a macro behavior that should be embraced by the organization. Under that umbrella many forms of quality controls should exist. These controls can range from statistical process controls to QFD (Quality Function Deployment) and ISO. All in all, any efforts should roll up and be consistent throughout the organization.

An organization based in a solid quality mindset will share the following values:

- Excellence
- Trust
- Compassion
- Competence
- Realism
- Accountability

When you execute your corporate initiatives against the backdrop of these principles, the true meaning of quality can be found. In addition, you will soon find out that quality is not external to business process, it is inherent. The ideal organization should not only allow for, but also promote cross-functional communication.

Cross-functional communication will then perpetuate shared expectations, agreed-upon standards and, in turn, harmonious operations. This type of structure takes the "got you" out of quality and replaces it with a "how can I help you" attitude. Although this sounds great on paper, do not be fooled by the difficulties when attempting to implement the change. In most cases we see organizations struggle with the shift. It takes time, and you cannot push too hard.

Capture what is working in the company, define what is broken, and work to close the gaps. As you concentrate on the mechanical attributes of the change, maintain focus on the people. Your structure should identify competency gaps and have a plan to fill them. One of the biggest mistakes made by quality practitioners is trying to enhance quality by shifting process or structure only. Do not forget the need to move people and process in a parallel task.

It is also important to assure alignment with the corporate vision and philosophical norms. Nothing is more frustrating to staff members than a quality effort that represents lip service only. As the accountable practitioner, you may have to fight the good fight first, and then deliver the message. Once this alignment is complete, everyone, including management, is accountable. However, you will soon see they are accountable to much more than a quality assurance or control standard. They are now accountable to a quality norm. A good quality effort is made up of varied components and each of them is imbedded in the fabric of your organization.