Changing Role of Quality Manager

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The role of the quality manager has changed radically over the past few decades but is set for even more radical shake-ups in the future. Michael Debenham goes back to the recent history of the quality manager to see where the profession is headed in the future.

In the mid 1960s UK manufacturing industry did not even have BS 5750 and the focus of an organisation’s quality related activity lay in quality control and quality rectification matters. The responsibility for the quality of product lay generally divided between the chief inspector and the head of the laboratory if the product required testing or commissioning.

The chief inspector would be responsible for the inspection of incoming product, in-process inspection and final inspection. Frequently there would be a significant team of inspectors and for critical product purchased from sub-contractors either home-based or overseas, the chief inspector would very possibly employ the services of a third-party inspection company. The chief inspector would also manage the process associated with inspection, for example fault rectification or what we now refer to as the control of nonconformances. In fact, of course, it was not that different from what it is today with the possible exception of the volume of paperwork. Even as late as late 1980s most of the pipeline laid in the UK sector of the North Sea was inspected by a team of third party pipeline inspectors at the pipe mill, coat and wrap and heavy coat plants. For operators such as Shell, BP and other oil majors in this sector, this would have been standard practice.

Chief inspectors duties would also include providing the data for control charts and ensuring process regulation on the basis of this data. Complex evaluation of the probable cause of process variation was probably left to the engineering department but more routine problems would fall within the jurisdiction of the chief inspector.

During the 1960s and early 1970s companies had not begun to ‘downsize’ significantly. Many manufacturing organisations still had their own well-equipped laboratory. The head of the laboratory would be responsible for all those activities associated with the laboratory, such as developing the test procedures, training technicians, procurement and calibration of test equipment. This responsibility would not always extend to the determination of the required accuracy of measurement, the frequency of test and consideration of the sample size and process variability, which would frequently lie with the engineering or design department.

At that time the assurance activities would be generally confined to the engineering department carrying out checks on their design calculations and specifications and checking drafting of the associated drawings. Submission of specifications and drawings to the customer for approval would also be classified as assurance ensuring customer wishes were fulfilled.

Within the UK defence industry and within the American and Canadian aerospace industries there had been earlier developments but it was not until the introduction of BS 5750 during the late 1970s that the position of quality manager began to emerge. It seemed to grow out of these two
positions and began to encompass activities that had not been part of either inspection or testing until then.

As quality management systems (QMS) began to extend right across the organisation, the demand for formal systems surfaced and the need to develop procedures became apparent. At that time the only departments that had written procedures were either the inspection department or the laboratory. Who better to write procedures and to delegate an unwanted task to than the newly found quality manager? At this time design procedures among other management system activities began to be written by the quality manager.

With a title like quality manager who better to be responsible for all product quality related issues? Indeed why not make the quality manager responsible for all customer complaints relating to quality? Why limit to quality issues? Much better to have a single focal point for all customer complaints and let the production manager concentrate on what really mattered, getting product out of the door irrespective of the quality. That could always be fixed later.

With the introduction of BS 5750 came the need to undertake internal auditing, another quality related activity. Corrective and preventive action also needed a home. Quality records, a wonderful term, also migrated toward the quality manager. With the advent of formal systems management came the need to carry out management review of the system and of one thing we can be sure, at that time, few management teams wanted to have anything to do with the QMS. Again the logical home was the QA department.

Some companies also had the perception that it was necessary to carry out regular audits of all their suppliers as part of the new way of assuring quality of product. This led to extensive audit programmes of suppliers, also administered by the quality manager and executed by the QA department often with the help of third-party service companies. Again, if we take the oil industry as an example, the auditing of suppliers became such a burden that the oil majors set up QUASCO a jointly owned company to undertake audits, share the results and to reduce the frequency of audit.

Finally the certification industry came of age with the promise of fewer customers audits and a proper yardstick for supplier evaluation and the need to have the QMS certified and hang a certificate on the wall became a driving force for some companies. Who better to liaise with the certifying body and arrange for the certification audits and all those customer audits, which still seemed to persist, than the quality manager? This drive to certification was further fuelled in the UK during the late 1980s by the Government’s Enterprise Initiative that provided some government funds to help organisations implement a QMS.

PROBLEMS THAT LED TO CHANGE

During the late 1980s a significant number of companies had what we used to call a bolted-on QMS. It was owned and administered totally by the QA department and the rest of the company simply paid lip service to it as they believed it got them onto a number of bid-lists that would otherwise have been beyond their reach. In fact the QMS was not owned nor even partially bought-into by the management team and in some cases the QMS was simply checked out just prior to certification audit, and did little more than cause the company considerable grief and significant sums of money. An expensive way to get onto those rather demanding bid-lists!

Some companies were beginning to question the wisdom of introducing a quality department in between the production department and the customer to field customer complaints. Why not let the customer ‘have a go’ at the production manager and make the production manager and the production team responsible for the equality of their product? After all in the ‘good old days’, the chief inspector would frequently report to the production manager.
Others were finding that there seemed to be two systems of performance improvement within the company. The first one owned by the management team and informally driven through the team meetings and the second owned by the QA department and heavily formalised and totally independent of the first. Why not have a single system, less formal but more focused around the way the management team worked?

The service industries were beginning to embrace the concept of quality management and the excessive use of procedures hampered a swift change of structure and in some sectors the service companies were not using to using procedures. In the UK schemes such as ‘Charter Mark,’ ‘Investors in People’ and ‘The EFQM Excellence Model’ were developed to encourage government departments, service organisations to deliver an improved quality of service.

The QMS appeared to do nothing for the traditional rivalry between the design department and the production department. What was worse with the growing empire of the quality manager, the rows between quality and production seemed to be getting worse with the quality manager being seen as the main interface with the customer and the one who was always pestering production to improve quality.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ROLE

So how is the role evolving and how can we expect it to develop? We are already beginning to see the move toward buy-in and ownership of the system by top management. After all, if the QMS has been causing us grief all these years, the best way to tackle this is to simply take over the part of the system that comes within your own sphere of influence. From a more constructive point of view management teams have become aware how much of their time has been spent in solving routine problems. Not only are they routine problems but some managers have been finding that they are solving the same problems that they had solved the previous year. Quite evidently solutions were not being captured so perhaps the QMS would solve this problem. With this ownership comes the understanding of the value of process owners and department managers being responsible for developing their own process documentation.

The understanding that the formality of the QMS meant that exposure to external and internal business risk could be reduced has begun to persuade chief executives that the QMS should be encouraged and supported. This has lead to management teams not only conducting meaningful management reviews of the QMS but actually taking ownership of the review process.

Some organisations are now beginning to see the value of developing a more enlightened approach to managing their relationships with their customers. Indeed some go so far as to arrange for feedback to be disseminated through the internal and external supply chains so that even the most remote links of the chain feel a commitment to the customer.

The benefits of undertaking internal audit using teams of peers trained in the skills of internal auditing has become widely recognised and the dedicated audit department is no longer seen as the cost effective solution. Finally there has been a move in the manufacturing sector to outsource much of the laboratory testing and even some of the inspection activities. In fact in some companies, with the responsibility for quality of product returning to the production department, inspection is being carried out by production again.

SO WHAT IS LEFT FOR OUR ESTEEMED QUALITY MANAGER?

We are already beginning to see many companies adopting an integrated approach to their management systems and including their environmental, health and safety activities. Additionally the HR function, data management and financial activities are also coming within the scope of the formal management system. On the horizon is the need to address social accountability and, for this to be effectively taken on board, it will have to come within the QMS. This does not mean that the quality manager is expected to be an expert in all of these disciplines,
indeed with the move toward management ownership of the QMS, this would not be desirable. It does mean, however the quality manager needs to be conformable discussing issues with those responsible and also with members of the board.

Being at the centre of the process of continual improvement, the quality manager is ideally placed to support or take the lead in improving business performance and developing new business opportunities. Some quality managers are now taking the primary role of business development manager and the secondary role of nominated management representative for the QMS. He is thus shedding much of the system responsibility that should better be shouldered by process owners and taking the role of mentor or coach to the process owner. Ironically one of the most useful aspects of this role may be to question the extent to which processes need to be documented and to remind process owners that defined and proven competencies together with training underpin processes and provide an acceptable assurance of quality.

Within this type of role there is room for supporting the introduction of new products and services. Indeed some of the tools currently in use have come from the quality sector. Advanced Product Quality Planning (APQP), for example, is now widely used within the automotive industry with significant success.

But perhaps the major opportunity for the quality manager is to embrace the role of champion of the ‘culture for opportunity’ and to promote this culture within the company. Defining a culture for opportunity is not easy, but some of the following ideas give a flavour for the basis of a culture for opportunity, being an environment which:

- recognises the importance of customers, both internal and external
- recognises the importance and value of people to the organisation
- recognises the potentially huge resource within the totality of personnel employed
- encourages personnel to submit opportunities to improve performance and prevent incidence of failure in performance
- ensures that mistakes never happen twice
- establishes a ‘system-to-blame’ environment, sometimes referred to as ‘no-blame’ although this should not be taken to mean that personnel are not required to account for performance
- ensures that both ‘solutions’ and, equally importantly, lessons learned from ‘mistakes’ are shared across an organisation
- provides recognition for the individual who was the source of successfully implemented initiatives

If defining it is not easy, bringing about the shift in culture that will allow such a culture to infuse throughout the whole organisation is best described as a challenge. It requires:

- the total support and commitment of the whole management team from top to bottom
- a realisation of what the management system is capable of delivering throughout the organisation
- a critical mass of personnel who believe that it is the way forward for the benefit of all

Of course bringing about this culture shift is not easy and cannot be brought about by any one single individual. The champion will need to drive this shift using a wide range of techniques. Personal enthusiasm is not sufficient - the champion will have to convince a nucleus of the key and respected members of the management team of the benefits of a culture shift. This nucleus will then have to extend the commitment and understanding to the full management team and those personnel for whom they are responsible – not an easy task when most of us are simply trying to tread water to survive. However, it is people with the appropriate knowledge, skills and energies that make the difference and can effect change within an organisation. To support such a culture shift an organisation must invest in its most precious resource by ensuring that its key personnel have the necessary skills and knowledge to enable this shift to take place.
In industries that are heavily regulated and have to demonstrate compliance for reasons of safety, the environment and sector regulations, the changes discussed may be slow in coming, if at all. In special cases such as large project work where a virtual company is established in a very short time scale to deliver a specific project, the traditional role of the quality manager will probably always be needed. But what other changes can we anticipate for the quality manager in those sectors that are not so heavily regulated? One that may be significant is the move in the internal audit process away from compliance and toward continual improvement.

In an organisation that is not within a strict regulation regime and has embraced a culture for opportunity, management may feel less committed to spending resources on determining compliance. Process performance and the process team discussions on whether they comply with requirements may be sufficient evidence. Most teams know whether they are complying or not and the reasons for not complying with requirements are usually related to resource issues rather than an intentional disregard for the requirement. Internal audit resources will be seen to provide a better return on investment by adopting a focus of performance improvement rather than compliance and the internal auditor will be seen more as the internal consultant and less as the internal policeman.

As the future for the quality manager unfolds we must continue to review and improve the tools, the training and educational support available to ensure that quality professionals can meet the expectations of business and industry and continue to deliver the competencies demanded by the community.