

**VIEWPOINT****Tottering Quality Management***By J. Ajith Kumar*

The concept of Total Quality Management (TQM) took the corporate world by storm almost two decades ago. There were many reasons for it, but the most important one being European Union's move to allow imports only from companies with ISO certification. International Standards Organisation (ISO) rose from anonymity to become a household name in the corporate world in no time. All types of business and organisations started looking for certification of their goods and services to keep up their exports. Until then 'quality' was at best considered a desirable attribute and only Japanese companies paid any attention to it as a policy. But the rush for ISO certification changed all that. Many good changes resulted but many more unwanted tendencies surfaced. Two decades down the lane it may be a useful exercise to retrospect on the issue. Did ISO certification bring about any desirable change? Is it necessary to continue with it in its present form? TQM is tottering and drastic steps (by ISO) are required if the good effects of quality movement are to survive.

**Erroneous Concepts**

There are two aspects to Quality Management – Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Control (QC). Ever since the advent of mass production and assembly lines, QC has been an integral part of the industry in the developed world. It sounds thoroughly logical to have someone or some system to control the quality of things produced in mass. Systems and procedures for QC vary from industry to industry. Non-Destructive Testing (NDT) of items, even if done on a random basis, is good for both the producer and user. It is no surprise that the concept of NDT caught on and developed into a full fledged engineering activity of its own. There is absolutely no dispute on the need to have the various levels of certifications in this field to maintain the quality of products.

It is the deceitful cousin (ie. QA ) that is suspect in the eyes of industry observers, especially in the services sector. We all know that it is possible to take any horse to the water front, but it is always up to the horse to drink it. Quality in an organisation is of a similar nature. We can have perfect systems & procedures for quality, but if the employees are not willing to follow, the whole system will fail to deliver. All companies in the services sector are victims of this syndrome. When the quality movement started, some shady agencies deceived their clients by promising that a quality assurance system, a quality certification and a quality assurance manager can ensure quality of the output. A QA system is as good or bad as the quality of those who implement it and no company with sub-standard employees can provide standard services even if there is an ISO certified QA system and an expert QA Manager in place.

The most significant development in the rush for quality has been the unprecedented growth in the number of certification agencies. From a few international players the number has grown in hundreds the world over. The initial few had a bountiful harvest when the rush started and that provided an ugly model for numerous 'operators' to try their hand at a low-investment-high-return business opportunity. The simple fact that most of the new certification agencies have their principals in Europe and it was the European Union that triggered the quality juggernaut makes the whole exercise suspect.

**Redundant Managers**

The single most beneficiary of this erroneous concept of Quality Assurance has been a set of professionals masquerading as Quality Assurance Managers (QAM) in ISO certified companies. They first descend on the victims (desperate for ISO certification) in the form of experts or consultants willing to assist in getting the initial certification. It goes to their credit that they do a useful job at this stage. In most companies, there will be severe shortage of expertise to document the procedures they follow in a systematic manner. This vacuum is easily filled up by the so-called ISO experts and consultants. After marathon sessions with the employees, an acceptable and auditable quality system is set up. Then these quality consultants (sometimes in the form of a full fledged company itself) spend months after months conducting mock audits, feedbacks and corrections, until finally the whole system is ready for offering to an accredited external agency for certification. It is always up to these ISO consultants to conclude their deal by 'arranging' a smooth audit and certification as per ISO norms.

The dubious and redundant aspect of quality management starts from this point. In order to maintain the certification and withstand the periodic surveillance audits of the external agency, most companies are too willing to accommodate these consultants or experts in the form of a Quality Assurance Manager. Guidelines of ISO have made it easier for these 'redundant' managers to report directly to the Chief Executive in order to keep "Quality" as a high level and independent function in the organisation. And that makes it easier for these climbers to stay on forever. Most of the time, their work is reduced to arranging 'facilities' for the external auditors and 'taking care' of them during the audits. Both these efforts do not necessarily contribute to the quality of the host organisation is a simple fact that misses the attention of the chief executives. In fact they are counter productive and retrograde. In the long run almost all such companies end up uneconomical thanks to their misplaced overemphasis on quality rather than profit. Quality is meaningful only in a profit making company and all the efforts for it must subordinate the ultimate objective of making profit

### **Desirable Changes**

It is time that the policy makers at ISO started thinking in terms of pulling their systems of auditing and certification out of the 'suspicion net' they have fallen into. There should be strict norms for authorisation of certification agencies and stricter ones for the way they conduct business. Recertification and surveillance audits should be more frequent and conducted in a transparent and professional manner. Qualification and integrity of the auditors must be thoroughly scrutinised. More than a profession of its own, auditors must be chosen from peers in the industry itself. Those who have not done mending by themselves can never audit or certify a mender.

There are several changes required on the part of the users of these certification agencies as well. The first change that is inevitable must come from the realisation that a Quality Assurance Manager in an ISO certified organisation is actually impeding quality rather than promoting it. Once written procedures are available and initial certification is over, all further revisions must be carried out by the owners of the procedures. And owners of quality procedures must be operating departments themselves and not the Quality Assurance Manager.

In most cases, once the ISO certification is over, the employees carry on with their usual work leaving the quality aspects to the QA Manager. This is not correct. The best way to avoid this scenario is to abolish the post of Quality Assurance Manager in all ISO certified companies. Internal audits must be carried out by the procedure owners themselves and external audits by accomplished auditors of integrity. If ISO doesn't see darkness at the end of the tunnel now, it would be disaster that awaits ISO certified companies in the near future.



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