

VIEWPOINT**“Management” of ISO Certification**

By J. Ajith Kumar

‘Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance’ was the catchy title of a work on metaphysics of quality in early 1970s. A similar work in the twenty first century can be aptly named ‘QAM and the Art of ISO Certification’. The whole of services sector is currently flooded with QAMs (Quality Assurance Managers) and quite ironically quality has become the main casualty in the process. ISO (International Standards Organisation or International Organisation for Standardisation) which created these QAMs in the first place are now finding it difficult to handle these demons (mostly in coat and tie). They resemble and have begun to act like the legendary demon let off the ancient bottle by the poor farmer. QAMs want ISO to survive but ISO is dying because of QAMs. If ISO does not find out a way to contain the damage caused by these QAMs (aided and abetted by the so-called certification agencies), ISO might itself end up as a dirty word.

Certification and recertification of companies in the services sector is one of the pet projects for any Quality professional. For the companies it is a pre-requisite for attempting more business, but for the QAM it is a few years of cushy and effortless job. The entire system works like a big bad caucus. Current certification industry is dominated by a few multi-national agencies and they themselves demarcate their regions like some of the wild animals in the forest. The tacit demarcation comes in the form of geographical areas or fields of operation. But the competing parties always follow the dictum that dog will not eat dog. It is very rare that one party gets into the certification or re-certification program of another one. The certification agencies know very well that ‘united we stand and divided we fall’. The last thing they want the world to know is their trade secret of minting money with zero value addition.

Original Certification

Original certification of any new company in services sector under ISO 9001:2000 standards is a plum opportunity for the certification agencies and QAMs. The willing prey first looks for a cheeky QAM to guide it through the certification process. This first mistake itself provides almost one to two years of substantial income for one of the lucky QAMs in the specialised territory of the jungle. All that the QAM invest in will be a couple of ties and coats to keep up his appearance with the top brass of the organisation. As soon as a jackal takes over guidance of the prey, the lions who own the territory are alerted. The willing prey is prepared well for the kill with ‘cut and paste’ procedures from QAMs’ old stock and resources available from their well oiled network. The copycat technology is so very obvious for anyone who is willing to compare the quality procedures of a few companies in the same services sector.

Once the prey is almost ready for the offering, the QAM sets the other side rolling with a drama of competitive bids for identifying the certification agency. The well organised network and racket among the leading certification agencies and QAMs are more unknown to the general public than their knowledge on quality as such. The bidding drama will satisfy the top management of the company but the whole system works in such a way that only the designated lion will get the prey in its area. What follows as

certification audit is well known to all those who have seen it first hand. At best it can only be described as a murder of the whole concept of quality. The much pampered Auditor sees only what he is meant to see and the ISO certification is a foregone conclusion in cent percent of the cases. The QAM is congratulated and he in turn congratulates everyone in the organisation, especially the top management, and the drama enters the second half.

Surveillance and Renewals

Periodic Surveillance Audits provide the much needed oxygen feed for the QAMs to survive within the body of the fallen prey. There are many companies in the services sector where the top management dreams about hiring a QAM only to get it certified and then to drop him after the objective is achieved. Invariably they end up outsmarted by the QA system. The ISO Certification Agency will put in enough conditions in the certificate that will make it impossible to operate with out a QAM on board. Brief Surveillance Audits, Detailed Renewal Audits, Compulsory Internal Audits, Scope Augmentation Audits etc., indicated by the ISO Certification Agency will always force the companies find budget for a QAM in their midst. Ultimately most companies decide to stick with the known demon than trying out another one unknown.

If the audit for original certification is an arranged drama, the subsequent skits of Surveillance Audits are unparalleled mockery of anything related to quality. It will not surprise anyone if we hear about cases where Surveillance Audits take place even without a physical visit by the Auditor to the premises of the company. If the QAM is resourceful enough all external audits can be taken care of in hotel rooms or through bank accounts. And if a visit did take place, the Auditor will see only what is shown to him and even if he sees serious breakdown of quality systems, his employer will ensure that the certification continues. After all everyone is in business and business means profit. How do we expect a business firm doubling as ISO Certification Agency to uphold the values of quality against the stark prospects of running into loss by losing business? Profit motive wins and quality will always lose in business.

This is the third and concluding part of my series on the misuse of ISO name which I am afraid will eventually lead to its decline. What started off as a professionally impartial process of certifying service companies against lofty objectives of excellence in quality is being hijacked by multi-national companies whose prime objective is to maximise their profits. To all those who think otherwise let me ask two simple questions – How many times have you seen or heard about a services company failing to get ISO certification? How many times have you seen or even heard about revocation of ISO certification for a company on the basis of a Surveillance Audit? I have 25 years experience in the industry and I have never seen nor heard about any one incident so far. Should I need anymore proof?

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