

It's a question of culture. But WHAT does it mean?

February 2, 2021

WHY IS ISO SO... determined to produce yet another “Guidance Standard” to support its ISO9001 “Quality management systems – Requirements” assessment standard? This year is expected to see the release of *ISO10010: “Guidance to understand, evaluate and improve organizational quality culture to drive sustained success”* – but it is a mystery who exactly has requested the document, or who might purchase it (ISO documents of a similar length cost £130+), given that there are so many sources of advice and good practice readily available these days.

Over recent years, ISO has produced a variety of other people-related “guidance” standards. I wonder just how many HR professionals even know that these exist, never mind have paid money for a copy?



Figure 1: Influencing Factors on your Management System

Interestingly, the term “quality culture” doesn’t appear at all in ISO9001, and the term “culture” appears just once. Is there not an expectation (given the fundamental quality management principle of “Customer Focus”) that a clear need will have been identified and established from organisations seeking help to establish the means to improve - well, what, exactly?

Richard Allan, the recently retired global head of Quality for a well-known multi-national organisation and now Managing Partner at Allan Strategic Consulting LLP, said:

“Culture is how everything gets done.

I'm not a believer in (Quality) Culture improvement programs - you just need to focus on doing the right things in the right way at the right time.

If you do that successfully, then the culture is right. If not, check if you are doing the right things, in the right way, at the right time”.

Perhaps we can expand this slightly to say that it also involves expectation and trust – how do you expect people to behave, and can you rely on them to live up (or down...) to these expectations?

I suspect that the answer cannot easily be defined in many larger organisations. Even in the NHS, where staff are currently working beyond most people’s expectations, there is a long-established convention, especially on the non-medical side, that no-one gets sacked. If someone is not performing, they are moved sideways, or even left in post, with their manager not only accepting that they can’t / won’t do the work but relying on someone else to feel obliged to cover for them.

At a different level, the Times’ recent coverage of issues at an international membership organisation where four non-executive directors were reportedly sacked for trying to raise the alarm over the way a critical report into its finances was allegedly suppressed internally, contrasts with the way most staff work for each other, build teamwork and take a pride in their performance. And “performance” is another issue – it was reported that it paid its bosses bonuses in 2019/20, despite having used taxpayers’ cash to furlough staff in the UK and making more redundant last year in a less than convincing business rationalisation exercise.

The focus on the one hand is (or should be) on the impact of these actions (or inactions) on staff, and on the other on customers (or members). But you can’t get away from the impact on staff in the latter case as well, since many of them have to deal with customers either directly or indirectly. There are other examples of chartered bodies losing sight of their role as member organisations as they seek to build their own empires, and corporate governance isn’t always well practised in the private sector.

And what about governments and political parties in power? Their prime focus more often than not is on their own objectives rather than on delivering the best services to their constituents – the relationship between objectives and culture is perhaps deserving of more attention.

One of the key elements in managing a business process is to identify the factors which can impact on the performance of the process, and the clash between and amongst competing objectives (personal, departmental and corporate) is often the source of unhappiness, underperformance and conflict.

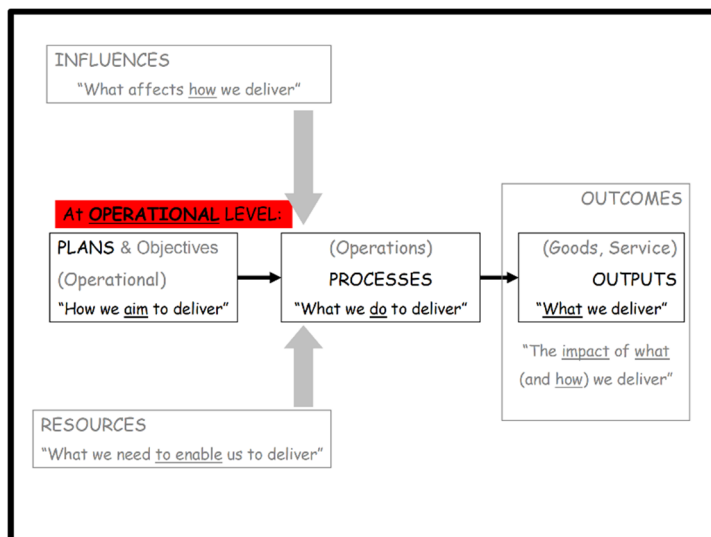


Figure 2: Influencing Factors on your Business Processes

So is there such a thing as “quality culture”? Corporate culture is (just) one of the factors that influence how well an organisation performs, how well its processes achieve their objectives and how fulfilled its staff will feel. And is there only one “corporate culture”? Or does each level,

division, or team, potentially have its own level of expectation and trust – within its own group, but also with others within the organisation?

The requirement to understand the needs and expectations of “interested parties” in the ISO 9001 standard has perhaps inadvertently caused the problem. While meeting customer (or members’) requirements remains the focus for those on the front line, there remains a need also to consider staff, suppliers, the wider community and the environment (and your reputation). This suggests that the organisations listed above would not qualify for certification against 9001 (even if they wanted to) and, more importantly, it makes it impossible to define “quality culture” as distinct from the culture of the organisation itself.

So is it a “No Go” for ISO this time?

For more details of our approach to defining a management system, and to managing individual business processes, go to <https://bit.ly/39tU4dO> and see <https://bit.ly/2L4Q4He> for more guidance. And the software to support this approach is at <https://mandossoftware.com/>