The Road to Developing an Effective Quality Management System (QMS): Part 1 - Why Bother?

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**Why Bother? It seems like a lot of work for nothing.**

Ease up on those brakes! Developing an effective QMS does require precious time and resources, but the benefits will far outweigh the work involved when the procedures and processes are followed and *continually improved*. An organization can benefit from developing and implementing an effective QMS in many ways. Here are some of the best:

- **Increased Efficiency** Much thought goes into developing a QMS, the result of which will be improved time management and use of resources. Once the QMS processes are established, guidelines are in place for employees to easily follow, like a well-marked highway.
- **Sustainability** Having established guidelines makes it simpler and less time-consuming to train new employees and transition existing employees to other positions. These guidelines are also helpful when tackling infrequently performed activities, or when key employees are out of the office. This will result in a smoother ride for your organization when facing those occasional potholes.
- **Improved Consistency** All of your key processes should be sufficiently defined, outlined and documented in your QMS. This will help you steer clear of guesswork and error, and will promote consistency in how the work is done.
- **Boost Employee Morale** Clearly defining roles and responsibilities, and how specific roles affect quality and the overall success of your organization, can contribute to a more knowledgeable, motivated, and satisfied staff.
- **Improved Customer Satisfaction** Did that make you turn on your high beams? The QMS defines the processes and procedures that can lead to providing high quality products and services to your customers. As mentioned above, increased efficiency and consistency will translate to increased customer satisfaction.
- **Process Improvement** The focus of any QMS should be on the continual improvement of processes. An effective QMS will have built-in systems that contribute directly to *continual improvement*, such as corrective and preventive actions, root cause analysis, and internal audits. Accidents happen – learn from them.

So, what exactly IS a quality management system (QMS)?
Technically speaking, a QMS is a set of coordinated activities to direct and control an organization in order to *continually improve* the effectiveness and efficiency of its performance. Think of it as a road map to managing your processes and activities, or a systematic way of doing business. These processes and activities work together to help an organization achieve a common objective: providing quality products and services to customers. (To learn more about what quality really means, check out this article: "What is Quality, Anyway?")
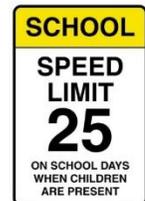
Here's a simple example. One common process in a testing laboratory is training new technicians. But is that really just one process? Probably not. Your training program likely involves many different processes: the trainee reads the test methods, watches a demonstration of the tests, performs the tests under supervision, has their competency evaluated periodically, etc. Let's not forget the documentation involved – completing ongoing training records, obtaining authorized signatures, filing the records, etc. All of these steps work together to ensure you have an effective training program.

How do I get started? This seems pretty complicated.
It's not as hard as it sounds! When developing a quality management system, the first (and most important) step is to define what quality means to your organization. This decision will ultimately have a great impact on the direction your QMS takes.

A common method of defining quality is in the form of a quality policy statement and objectives. A quality policy statement includes an organization's philosophy regarding the quality of its products and processes. For instance, an organization may state that customer satisfaction and timely services are its top priorities. Specific quality objectives, or goals, can then be formulated from this statement, such as achieving 100% customer satisfaction or providing services within 24 hours of a request. Measuring and tracking these goals is a great way to ensure that the organization's QMS is effective.

Although not specifically required by all quality management system standards, a quality policy statement can be thought of as the backbone of QMS. An organization should strive to ensure that its key processes are always in alignment with the quality policy and objectives.

Driving Quality Home

Once defined, an effective quality management system must be maintained. The steps to maintain a quality management system include three main components:

1. *Say what you do* – document key procedures, keeping the quality policy and objectives in mind.
2. *Do what you say* – perform processes in accordance with written procedures.
3. *Prove it* – maintain records to document activities.

The most common foundation for a QMS is something you've probably heard of – the (often dreaded) quality manual. The quality manual should include a written description of how important processes are performed and... *how those processes connect*. (Remember the road map?) The quality manual is your handbook to the QMS – it should tell you what the processes are and where important documents can be found.

Where do I go from here?

Part 2 of my series on Developing an Effective QMS will focus more on getting started. I will include some advice on tackling the initial development phase as well as tips, tricks, and pitfalls to avoid. What should (and shouldn't) be documented? How can an effective QMS help you with document control? Part 2 will also include a discussion of the AASHTO Accreditation Program (AAP) and AASHTO R 18 requirements, including tools that will help you ensure your QMS is in tip-top shape. Future articles will expand on maintaining your QMS and the ways in which AASHTO re:source has directly benefited from establishing a formal QMS of its own.