The Road to Developing an Effective Quality Management System – Part 2, Getting Started

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It's time to hit the road and get this QMS thing started! The first part of my series (Part 1 – Why Bother?) focused on the many benefits of developing and implementing an effective QMS. Let's see where this road will take us next.

You Already Have a Head Start!

By now, your organization probably has defined quality and quality objectives as they relate to your business. You may have even developed a nifty quality policy statement to tie everything together. The next step is to think about what you *already* do. It's likely that you already have at least some of your organization's key processes documented, such as the employee training program, equipment calibration and maintenance programs, sample management system, and test reporting steps. You have been keeping records of these activities too, right? Are these key processes in alignment with your organization's definition of quality (i.e. the quality policy)? Great! Chances are you also have an organizational chart as well as position descriptions and résumés for staff. Guess what? You're already well on your way without having to do anything extra (yet)!

…But Everyone Has to Follow the Rules of the Road

If your organization is required to be in conformance with specific quality management system standards, such as *AASHTO R 18, ASTM C1077, ASTM E329*, or *ISO/IEC 17025*, it's time to take a look at those requirements. You will need to ensure that your "i's" are dotted and your "t's" are crossed. If you haven't already done so, you might have to formally document your procedures for contract review, purchasing, responding to complaints, and corrective actions, among other things. Heck, you might even have to start doing (and documenting) some new things, such as developing a document control system, soliciting feedback from customers, and conducting regular internal audits. Sound overwhelming? It's really not so bad. Just chip away at it, and always keep your laboratory's quality policy, and the benefits of these activities, in mind…

Remind Me Why Am I Taking This Trip Again?

A fully documented and effective QMS will ensure that the requirements of both your organization and your customers are met. The QMS will ensure that (1) your organization efficiently uses its available resources, such as personnel, materials, information, and technology, and (2) your customers have confidence in your organization's ability to deliver the desired products and services by consistently meeting your customers' needs and expectations. Those are some pretty darn good reasons to do this, right?!

Ladies and Gentlemen, Start Your Engines!

My best advice in getting started? Keep it simple and to the point. Over-documenting unnecessary details wastes time, and you'll likely end up with a quality manual that is never referenced. Focus on the important stuff first – what your laboratory already does (key processes), and what is required by the QMS standards. It's okay to document other stuff too, like safety and human resource policies, especially if those things are of value to your organization. But does the quality manual really need to include details about ordering coffee supplies? Sure, enjoying a good cup of java is a nice way to start the day, but it probably doesn't have a big impact on delivering quality products and services to your customers.

Your QMS will likely include a series of standard operating procedures (or SOP's), work instructions, and policies. When it's time to start writing, think about what is truly important to note about those specific processes. Steer clear of the fluff and concentrate on the facts. Remember, the QMS should act as a guideline for employees to easily follow, like a well-marked highway. You don't want to muck up the road with a lot of detours that won't help you get to your ultimate destination of developing an effective QMS.

Another great tip is to get as many key people as you can actively involved in the process of developing your QMS. Getting buy-in from others in your organization will help distribute the workload, and you will also get valuable input from those that are directly involved in the important processes you are trying to describe. Having everyone on board will ultimately help with the implementation of the QMS as well, since employees have invested their time in the development of it.

Atlas or GPS?

Once everything is properly documented, you will have to decide if your QMS information will be available on paper (hard copy), electronically, or both. It's really your preference, but you may find that having electronic access to everything will be more user-friendly and will help with document control. If all documents are kept in an electronic file and there are no hard copies available, you won't need to worry about your staff using outdated or inaccurate information. Many organizations have their QMS documentation immediately available to employees right at their fingertips, through the company website. This eliminates the need to track down a binder on a dusty bookshelf in a remote location, but the choice is entirely yours.

Hazardous Conditions Ahead!

So, what can go wrong with a QMS? First and foremost, don't lose focus on what quality means to your organization when developing your QMS. That being said, most QMS problems can be categorized in one of the following ways:

- *Required documents or records do not exist.* Do you have all required documents and records available for review? Checklists can be very useful to ensure everything is in place.
- *Documents or records are incomplete.* Does each document and record include all required information? Are all fields completed on all records, such as dates, signatures, etc.? Again, try using checklists to verify everything.
- *Documents are inaccurate.* Does your documentation accurately describe what you are doing today? Be careful not to copy the examples in *AASHTO R 18* verbatim or borrow information from other organizations – you probably do things at least a little differently.
- *Documents and records are not current.* Is your organizational chart current? Have equipment records been updated in accordance with stated intervals? Customers that responded to the previous article's Reader Survey indicated that they use the calendar feature in Microsoft Outlook to keep track of technician competency evaluations, equipment calibrations, proficiency sample testing deadlines, and even upcoming audits. This easy-to-use software allows you to enter due dates and automatic reminders into personal and company calendars to help keep you organized, on time, and in compliance.

Tips for a Smoother Ride

If you are new to the AASHTO Accreditation Program (AAP) scene, or even if you'd like to revamp your existing QMS, the first step is to ensure that you have a current copy of *AASHTO R 18* to review. This document is included in the *AASHTO Standard Specifications for Transportation Materials* book set, and it is also sold as a single standard through the AASHTO Bookstore. *AASHTO R 18* clearly spells out all of the documentation requirements, and the appendix includes many example documents and records to help you develop your own QMS.

AASHTO re:source Has To Check Its Oil Too!

Part 3 of my series on Developing an Effective QMS will focus on how to finish and maintain your QMS, as well as the ways in which AASHTO re:source has directly benefited from establishing a formal QMS of its own. Until then, I wish you a productive trip on the QMS superhighway!