

## **Authentic Quality Certifications: A Discussion on the Validity of Quality Initiatives**

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### Abstract

Whether in the workplace or the classroom, when the discussion turns to quality issues such as ISO 9000, many knowledgeable and experienced employees will grimace and sarcastically laugh at the topic. Many of these employees question the validity, authenticity, and sincerity of their company's quality initiatives. As former leaders in the workplace and current leaders in the classroom, we have noticed that this is a common occurrence. However, it shouldn't be a surprise. All one has to do is open the newspaper and see recent quality fiascos involving very reputable businesses. These recent news developments involving the issues of quality lends credence to these negative perceptions. We would like to discuss some of these current examples. We would also like to focus on one specific quality initiative; ISO 9000. We would like to offer a thumbnail sketch of ISO 9000, and through interviews and research, examine the validity of this quality initiative. Finally, we would like to conclude by summarizing the interview and research and offering recommendations for future initiatives.

### I. Introduction

Whether in the workplace or the classroom, when the discussion turns to quality issues such as ISO 9000, many knowledgeable and experienced employees will grimace and sarcastically laugh at the topic. Many of these employees question the validity, authenticity, and sincerity of their company's quality initiatives. As former leaders in the workplace and current leaders in the classroom, we have noticed that this is a common occurrence. However, it shouldn't be a surprise. All one has to do is open the newspaper and see recent quality fiascos involving very reputable businesses. These recent news developments involving the issues of quality lends credence to these negative perceptions. We would like to discuss some of these current examples. We would also like to focus on one specific quality initiative; ISO 9000. We would like to offer a thumbnail sketch of ISO 9000, and through interviews and research, examine the validity of this quality initiative. Finally, we would like to conclude by summarizing the interview and research and offering recommendations for future initiatives.

## II. Current and Historical Examples

Recently the media has made the public aware of several examples of quality disasters. The foremost example is the Firestone Tire and Ford Explorer partnership. The tread separations from these faulty tires have caused approximately 103 deaths, over 2, 226 complaints, and reports of more than over 400 injuries (1). These authors go on to report that critics have charged that the tire company was aware of the quality problem well before 1996 and documents show that in 1996 Firestone took eighteen tires off its production lines for random tests of their durability at high speeds and eight of those tires failed. A notation in the documents also indicates that Firestone made some changes in its manufacturing process in 1997 and investigators have asked that Firestone turn over all its audit information as well as an explanation of what corrective actions in manufacturing the company took in 1997 and why they were taken (1).

Anyone who has been involved in a manufacturing process is well aware that quality issues will surface periodically. Although we can all accept the natural variations involved in manufacturing, one has to question the responses to these variations. One has to question the authenticity, sincerity and validity of quality initiatives with the following claims. Six former employees of the Firestone plant in Decatur, IL, which manufactured many of the 6.5 million tires recalled, claim that workers used questionable tactics to speed production in the mid 1990's (6). This author goes on to report that these workers allege that (6):

- Decatur workers engaged in practices such as puncturing bubbles on tires to cover up flaws on products that should have been scrapped.
- Conditions in the plant, particularly high humidity from a lack of air conditioning in some areas, made it more likely that corrosion would occur on the brass-coated steel in the steel-belted radial tires.
- Employees had powerful financial incentives to release botched tires to the motoring public.

Many organizations will claim that they are "ISO 9000" certified. They will claim their employees use statistical process controls to monitor the quality of the product. But often, one sees the following scenario in the everyday life of the worker. These employees reported that if you were behind in production, "some tires would get passed through without being inspected." These employees said that due to meeting stringent quotas, inspections of finished products were often virtually non-existent (6). There are at least three more former employees prepared to step forward and testify in sworn depositions that these practices continued well into the mid-1990's. To add insult to injury, a Firestone spokesperson has suggested that the consumer is responsible for the tread separations due to under inflating the tires and abuse of the tires (6).

Another recent media report has employees at Mitsubishi Motors reporting cover up of defects. Mitsubishi has recently recalled 88,000 vehicles on top of 532,000 vehicles

recalled last month. Although these vehicles were manufactured in Japan, many were shipped to the United States. The recalls are on several defects including failing brakes, fuel leaks, malfunctioning clutches, and fuel tanks prone to falling off (8). According to Kageyama (8), for years employees at Mitsubishi Motors tucked consumer complaints about auto defects in a special place simply known as “File H” or the Japanese name for secret or defer. The defects reported above were all fixed on a case-by-case basis to avoid embarrassing recalls said Kageyama. Kageyama also reported that Mitsubishi admits to the cover up and that the practice dated back to 1977 and was carried out with full knowledge of workers, managers, and even one current board member. President of Mitsubishi, Katsuhiko Kawasoe, said that “the problem was the lack of conscience among our employees” (8). But isn’t it the management’s responsibility to set the example and set up measures of accountability?

There is little need to explain why a solid ethical foundation is an important strategic tool in the area of quality assurance. To ignore ethics is to run a very high risk, both in human and in financial terms (4). Richard Daft developed a list of the qualities that leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century won’t need and one of those qualities is deniability (3). Daft said that leaders need to close the trust gap and when things go wrong, accept responsibility rather than shift the blame. Today’s best leaders ignore quick fixes and practice the basics that rely on ancient wisdom: respect, vision, listening, sensing the environment around them, and acting with courage. Kawasoe blamed the employees for the quality cover-ups but we must attribute the actions of the organization to the leader of the organization. A Firestone spokesperson suggested that the quality problems rest with the consumer. Although it may be too late for Firestone, the leader of Bridgestone/Firestone should be held responsible. Deming’s 85-15 principle states it simply: 85% of what goes wrong in an organization is due to management.

These stories seem to bring back historical quality horror stories. Who can forget Lee Iacocca and the Ford Pinto’s quality issues with its launch? By conservative estimates, Ford Pinto crashes caused over 500 burn deaths to people who would not have been seriously injured if the car had not burst into flames (10). At the time, Lee Iacocca ordered the shortest production-planning period in modern automobile history. It was discovered during the pre-production tests that a serious defect in the gas tank was present but unfortunately it was too late. Lee Iacocca was fond of saying, “Safety doesn’t sell” (10). The crash test also showed that a one-pound, one-dollar piece of metal would stop the puncture of the gas tank, it was thrown out as extra cost and extra weight. Internal company documents showed that Ford had crash-tested the Pinto at a top-secret site more than forty times and that every test made at over 25 mph without special structural alteration of the car had resulted in a ruptured fuel tank. Despite this information, Ford still denied having crash-tested the Pinto (10). One would like to believe that Americans learned their lessons through catastrophes like these, but the recent news developments tell us differently. Throughout time, corporate America has jumped on all the discretionary quality trends that have surfaced in business. Americans finally seemed to accept Total Quality Management. Americans seemed to embrace the Statistical Process Control Methods. One doesn’t have to be in the ranks with Deming to see that corporations are not successfully implementing these tools. Time and time again,

corporations claim they are devoted to quality and consumer issues and time and time again, we see stories like those above. Do corporations really have their hearts in the right place? If so, where in the process does it all go awry? Are all quality management techniques simply trends or fads that are embraced only to be discarded later? Maybe we can get some answers by studying the international quality standards that set the tone for a global marketplace. Americans have also been forced to jump on the international quality standard bandwagon called ISO 9000. This remaining portion of this paper will focus on the validity of this quality initiative

### III. ISO 9000

H. Michael Hayes describes ISO 9000 well (7):

In the lexicon of quality, a new word—ISO 9000—has surfaced. It is not, as some have facetiously suggested, a new soap that reaches 9000 parts of the body. Nor is it a new superfast film for 35 mm cameras. And it is not, as has been seriously suggested, a plot on the part of the European Community (EC) to erect another trade barrier against U.S. goods and services. It is a new set of standards, promulgated by the International Organization for Standardization, that is likely to have more impact on quality practices around the world than any other single quality concept.

It was a matter of time before an international quality standardization program was established. Globalization has changed how everyone views business. The question, of course, had become, not will it happen, but whose quality standard certification prototype would be implemented? In 1987, the ISO published five international standards designed to guide internal quality management programs and facilitate external quality assurance purposes. Initially viewed as just a requirement for doing business in Europe, it is now becoming clear that ISO 9000 is a requirement for the U.S. as well. Large and small firms alike have registered U.S. plants to ISO 9000 to satisfy the requirements of European customers (7). These firms give preference to ISO 9000-certified suppliers. ISO 9000 has a stringent certification standard and requires periodic audits. The ISO 9000 standard includes 21 elements that must be addressed in developing a quality system and is not designed to be a total quality system. ISO 9000 is meant to offer assurance to the ongoing integrity of a quality assurance program that is already in place (7).

Throughout this paper, we have discussed quality shortcomings and the negative perception that workers have about quality initiatives. It is our goal to explore the validity of ISO 9000. To achieve this goal, we interviewed three people that have high involvement with the ISO 9000 certification system. Valerie Pullen is a supervisor of in-process control at a leading automobile manufacturing plant. Valerie makes the final quality decisions and is very familiar with ISO 9000 certification. The second person that we interviewed is in charge of the ISO 9000 and QS 9000 certification process at an automobile parts supplier. In fact, Ruby Crider, is employed by a plant that supplies the automobile plant where Valerie is employed. And lastly, Kristy Edwards is the Production Superintendent at a pharmaceutical manufacturing plant. We decided to ask

them about the topic of ISO 9000 and discuss the validity, authenticity, and sincerity of the quality effort at their respective manufacturing plants.

#### IV. Interviews

Valerie Pullen summed up the quality views of her company by stating: “The standard becomes the lowest quality accepted at any given time.” Ms. Pullen stated that it is her job as supervisor in final quality inspection to find defects. The result of finding defects is repair. However, off-line repair is viewed as undesirable and therein lies the paradox. Valerie noted that differences in acceptable quality levels between shifts tarnishes credibility. Valerie believes in enforcing all quality standards consistently but because other shifts do not consistently do the same, she is reminded of her quotas and that the other shifts are making those quotas and she is not. Because Valerie’s shift ends at 3:00 a.m., many vehicles are labeled “2:59 shippers.” These are vehicles with defects that Valerie wouldn’t allow her shift to pass that would be staged for the next shift with the implication that they would pass because the supervisor wasn’t as critical as Valerie. To make matters worse, when Valerie follows the company predetermined quality standards she is constantly reminded by upper management that she is stopping production meaning that if defects are not accepted and parts must be replaced, the parts will run out leading to a lost of quota for her shift. She also has been asked, “do you want to tell everyone that they will be working this weekend?” This simply means that if she continues to follow the quality standards, she will be responsible for mandatory overtime for herself and her associates. Valerie noted that nowhere is quality deception more evident than when one looks at the ISO 9000 audits. Valerie said that you can directly relate true business practices and business dedication to ISO requirements. If you have to hurriedly prepare for ISO 9000 audits, you are not practicing it to the extent intended, said Valerie. Valerie claims that ISO 9000 is not taken seriously on an every day basis. She said positive ISO quality audits are only achieved through a last minute scrambling and that these quality standards are not adhered to on an everyday basis. Kristy Edwards, product superintendent for a leading pharmaceutical manufacturer, agreed with Valerie’s assessment on ISO audits. She said that there is a heightened awareness of quality standards for a short time during ISO 9000 audits. She said that it is unfortunate that these quality standards are only considered when preparing for the ISO 9000 audit. She, too, described it as a last minute scrambling. She said that personally she tries to set examples everyday and convince her associates to adhere to the company’s quality standards but she said that production quantity or quotas are so ingrained in most of the people around her that it feels like a losing battle. Ruby Crider is the ISO/QS 9000 Coordinator at a supplier manufacturing plant that supplies such companies as Ford, Honda, GM, Subaru, Isuzu, and Mazda. Ruby said that the majority of the management team and associates simply tolerate the guidelines set forth in QS 9000. Most of these people do not feel the standards are necessary in order to run a business and instead view them as another flavor of the month. She remarked that most of the management team and associates feel that the ISO/QS standards are something that must be endured in order to do business with the “Big Three.” She said that the company started with Ford’s “Q1,” moved to ISO 9001, QS 9000 and now have both ISO 9000/2000 and TS 16949 which will add more stringent guidelines and are intended to help the company provide quality

parts to the customer. Ms. Crider reported that this doesn't seem to be viewed as a continuous improvement method by management and associates, but is viewed as a greater burden to the already frustrated workforce. She said that again, as a company, change isn't embraced or viewed as an improvement of systems, instead, it is viewed as another way that auditors can make their lives miserable. Ruby said that the company waits until the day before an audit and cuts and pastes and creates masterpieces to pacify another auditor just enough to get through another audit without any major non-conformances.

These three interviews confirm and explain why students in classrooms smirk when the name ISO 9000 is mentioned. Textbooks try to make the students believe a picturesque and ideal quality initiative, but most of the adult students who have lived ISO 9000 know the truth and are not convinced otherwise.

## V. Recommendations

Valerie Pullen offered a set of guiding questions to ask when observing ISO 9000 compliance mandates:

1. Do you hurriedly get everything in order for an ISO audit or has ISO become ingrained into everyday processes and kept current?
2. Do you hurriedly schedule special cleaning for VIP tours or is the facility maintained with pride on an ongoing basis?
3. Do you hurriedly prepare products for quality audits by going over them with a fine tooth comb during special inspection and testing or are you confident you can excel during a quality audit achieved through your organization's normal everyday quality assurance procedures?
4. Do you deviate from or allow quality standards to be compromised to meet targets or reduce costs or do all levels of your organization understand and adhere to set quality standards?

Valerie Pullen noted that it isn't ISO 9000 or even Total Quality Management philosophies that are not authentic or genuine. It is the lack of authenticity of the management and the businesses who claim to be quality driven but only use the certifications as badges of honor that can be flaunted for all suppliers, global markets, and consumers. Valerie's suggested guiding questions are recommended for all businesses and upper management to consider. Not only should the upper management team sincerely embrace these quality initiatives, they should demonstrate their sincerity by mandating that all associates take the quality initiatives seriously as well. Managers and associates alike should be encouraged to see the big picture and why these quality initiatives were embraced from the beginning. Quality initiatives are more than the short-term thinking of immediate certification standards and audits, it is about ingraining quality thinking within your organization as a way of life and a way of doing business.

## VI. Conclusion

Negative perceptions of quality initiatives can be changed if the above guidelines are adhered to at all levels of the organization. A business can be maintained by exerting the minimum quality effort. It's long been said that you get out of life what you put in. If upper management only is perceived as following the latest quality trend and not taking that seriously, the employees will sarcastically laugh when they are in our classrooms. Those employees will make decisions like those made at Ford, Firestone, and Mitsubishi. It isn't Total Quality Management, Statistical Process Control, or ISO 9000 which is at fault. Whether it is Deming or the international agency for quality, the authentic, valid, and sincere effort towards quality is truly a key to positive results. These proactive and long-term quality initiatives are only to serve as the foundation. What is built on that foundation depends on management.

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