Managing your own quality

One way to ensure we always keep our customers happy and stay competitive is to get a qualified third party to manage our processes and output. Such services usually come with a fee. However, as companies find ways to cut operating costs, this is one area that is often sacrificed. In lieu of independent quality management, these companies empower their employees to manage their own quality of output. This should work, right, since their livelihood depends on it? What could possibly go wrong?

We are not wired for quality

When push comes to shove, we are by nature more interested in getting to the end of a task than how well we complete it. Quality processes require impeccable execution of deliberate, often sequential, tasks aimed at meeting the needs of the ultimate beneficiary of the act or service - each time, every time - with no error. For most of us, the expectation of doing things only in a certain way is near impossible because most of us instinctively find ways to get to the end of the task in the shortest time. Well, at least the more conscientious ones among us do. The problem with this is that the shortest route to the end need not necessarily be the most productive or even compliant.

Teams that manage their own quality need maturity

Secondly, we are talking about empowering employees to make decisions at micro and macro - perhaps even strategic - levels for the business with every action they take. Add to this challenge, the volume and complexity of the daily work and we can quickly appreciate the gravity of the task. This requires both the workers and supervisors to possess a good degree of maturity.

Survival instincts trump process management

When my former employers decided to do away with ISO 9001 certification for a section of their business, a responsibility I oversaw for eight years, I noticed that two aspects of the quality process started to fall away - documenting changes in work processes and measuring team performance. I reckon they dropped these two processes because they were time-consuming. When supervisors are forced to choose between spending their time documenting process changes or creating performance charts, and completing customer orders, it is not hard to understand why they would rather focus their energies on completing customer orders. It is, after all, their bread and butter. Quality is a nice-to-have. And herein lies the problem.

Conflict of interest

Quality processes often come with rigorous checks and balances. Hence, every quality process has to be supervised, which is the case in an ISO 9001-certified business. When an action does not adhere to the agreed process, it would show up as a non-compliant item at its scheduled ISO audit. Nobody wants to have his/her name mentioned in the auditor's report, which is sent to senior management. If quality is self-managed, its interest is in direct conflict with the team's desire to complete a task in the shortest time possible. So, the key principle to being a team that self manages its quality, is uncompromising discipline. My personal experience with this is that businesses only reap the full benefits of quality when their quality process is managed by an independent party. This way, their performance is unbiasedly and clinically managed and audited. Otherwise, the business relies more on good fortune to achieve success.

If you still cannot afford to implement a supervised quality process in your organisation after all the compelling reasons I've given you here, there is one other way you could consider. At the very least, you should include quality goals in each employee's job objective or scope, and use these (output and customer satisfaction) results as determinants of their individual performance ratings. This way, both workers and supervisors are responsible for the quality of output of the business.