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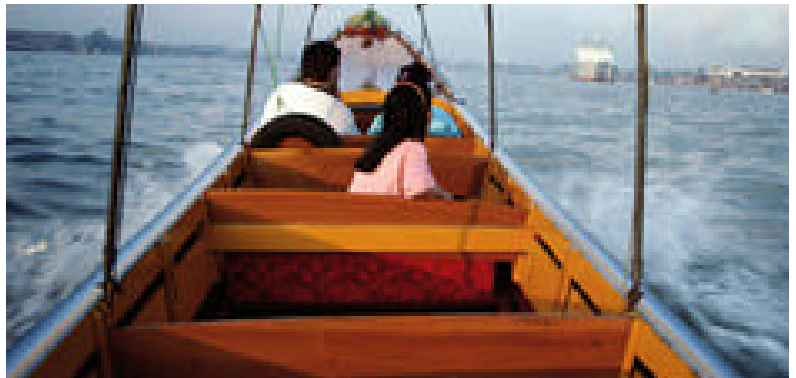
Excellence: the journey starts here

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excellence! the journey starts here



Jim Wade, director of Advanced Training, is no apologist for ISO 9000, having seen many cases of QMSs which leave people demotivated and do not help managers to manage quality. However, he argues that the standard can still provide a sound base for excellence. The secret is in the principles and management behaviours that they imply

In the somewhat rarefied world of excellence, any mention of ISO 9000 is likely to be met with a less than welcoming response. This is quite understandable. It is difficult to argue the case for a relationship between excellence and ISO 9000 when there are so many instances in which its application has results that fall far short of excellence! Complaints by employees of stifling bureaucracy and managers allocating valuable resources specifically to prepare for certification body visits are just two common outcomes of ISO 9000.

And yet ISO 9000 is pandemic. Upwards of a quarter of a million organisations worldwide are registered. Of course, this is no indication of wide-scale improvement, let alone excellence. Some commentators have even gone so far as to suggest a sort of conspiracy that has allowed this to happen, with promotional policies that allegedly amount to wholesale coercion of managers. But putting aside discussions of the rights and wrongs of the current state of ISO 9000, let us instead focus on what

the managers of an ISO 9000 registered company can do to approach excellence.

What is excellence?

The EFQM defines excellence as 'outstanding practice in managing the organisation and achieving results' - not only by hitting the end-of-term numbers, but also by managing well. This view is reflected in the structure of the model, in which the enablers specify areas where good management practice is expected to apply, in order to achieve excellent results in terms of people (employees, customers and society at large) as well as in terms of the more commonly understood performance measures. Crucially, this outstanding practice, if we are to get benefit from the model, needs to be founded on given concepts (see table 1).

We are encouraged to think of excellence not as something we might achieve one day, but rather as how we are managing the organisation now (with our behaviours guided by the concepts in table 1) in order to get better results later.

Eight seems to be a fashionable number in the world of quality and business excellence at the moment. As well as the eight concepts of the EFQM model, ISO 9001:2000 gives a list of eight quality management principles. A close look at the helpful explanations provided by EFQM and ISO reveals that the eight principles of quality management and the eight concepts of excellence say very similar things, often in very similar words (see table 2). It would appear that the standards-led world of ISO 9000 may now, as the 2000 revisions dawn, be closer than we might have thought to the management-led world of the EFQM excellence model (see table 2 for how the lists correlate).

This similarity should not come as a surprise. Most managers committed to quality will recognise these fundamental principles. The fact that ISO now states them overtly is beside the point, since they underpin the standards anyway. The excellence model is no more or less than a definition of TQM (the EFQM's words), so it is based on the same principles.



Getting excellence from an ISO 9000 base

The really interesting consideration for managers interested in excellence and continual improvement is the degree to which we take the principles seriously. In other words: do organisations behave in accordance with the principles? Below are some of the actions implied by each of the principles in an ISO 9000 environment. Actions that we would expect from the management of an organisation that is really committed to achieve excellence.

Continual improvement

Does an organisation use its QMS to help it improve? Improvement - like survival - is not compulsory! Some organisations have acquired ISO 9000 simply to remain in contention for business, so their pre-occupation is with compliance. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this - if future business with a customer depends on still having an ISO 9000 certificate, compliance is clearly important.

However, if an organisation believes in business excellence, it would apply the continual improvement principle underlying ISO 9000 by taking actions such as:

- setting objectives for the next steps to improvement that are specific, measurable, properly communicated and agreed, relevant to policy and with a deadline. Such objectives are often completely absent from an ISO 9000 QMS, despite it being a clear requirement of ISO 9001 and ISO 9002
- including improvement objectives for people, processes and customer satisfaction, as well as for product performance results
- start measuring in terms of achieving the improvement objectives, rather than in terms of reducing the number of 'non-conformities' for example
- incorporating quality reviews into normal management reviews - as opposed to conducting separate annual management reviews of quality
- using the internal quality audit as a mechanism for process improvement and people development, not just as a precursor to an external assessment for compliance

Table 1. Commonly-understood performance measures

Customer focus	Leadership and constancy of purpose
Results orientation	Management by processes and facts
Public responsibility	Continuous learning, innovation and improvement
Partnership development	People development and involvement

Customer focus

If this principle is taken seriously then the focus will be reflected not only by words in the quality policy but also by actions such as:

- setting specific objectives that define what customer satisfaction means to us and our customers
- encouraging customer feedback, even if negative - treating complaints as opportunities for improvement
- including the review of progress towards the achievement of the objectives in regular management reviews, rather than just waiting for complaints
- including customers in process improvement activities
- training and empowering people in basic customer care - starting with telephone skills

The approach

This includes a process approach, a factual approach to decision making, and a system approach to management. Indicators

of the application of ISO 9000 principles are that management:

- identifies and documents key business processes, not just departmental procedures
- assigns each process to a relevant senior manager who takes responsibility for its improvement
- identifies process performance measures and establishes process improvement objectives, rather than just product-related objectives
- ensures measurements are taken and results regularly reviewed - applies plan-do-check-act methodology
- identifies any quality record that does not measure the company's achievement against its objectives - eliminating the record unless it is needed for legal, regulatory or customer assurance purposes

Involvement of people means:

- placing managers in charge of lead improvement teams and eliminating

Table 2. Correlation of excellence concepts and quality management principles

Excellence concepts of the EFQM model	Quality management principles of ISO 9001: 2000
Customer focus	Customer focus
Leadership and constancy of purpose	Leadership
Management by processes and facts	Process approach Factual approach to decision making System approach to management
People development and involvement	Involvement of people
Results orientation	
Public responsibility	
Continuous learning, innovation and improvement	Continual improvement
Partnership development	Mutually-beneficial supplier relationships



The EFQM model has always had its underpinning concepts (the wording has varied just a little over the years). But ISO 9000's more recent introduction of similar principles should not be taken to imply that those principles are taken seriously by the process by which the 2000 revisions are being introduced.

ISO used to tell us we should use the guidance parts of ISO 9000 to set up an effective QMS as a foundation for continual improvement. Only after this should we consider using ISO 9001/2/3. However, now ISO tells us the opposite: employ ISO 9001 first, then use the ISO 9004 (the document that contains the principles) if we 'wish to move beyond the minimum requirements of ISO 9001'.

Exactly why this U-turn was made is unclear, it simply encourages even more organisations to adopt the already common poor practice of putting the cart (registration) before the horse (defining an effective and efficient management system).

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quality circles in which they are not involved

- encouraging people to propose system improvements that make things better for them
- making 'objectives creation' a 360-degree affair - discussed and agreed up and down the organisation and along the value chain of key processes
- responding to peoples' complaints about 'increased bureaucracy' or 'unnecessary paperwork' - they can usually suggest improvements


Mutually-beneficial supplier relationships include:

- suppliers in process improvement activities

Leadership must:

- be consistent - leading by example
- communicate (in plain business language and at every opportunity) about the purpose of the system, the current objectives, performance levels, improvements needed and the importance of teamwork
- learn the basic techniques and tools of improvement, using them and teaching them to others
- use ISO 9004-1:1994 (or ISO 9004:2000) as a guide

Wrongful dismissal

ISO 9000 is often applied incorrectly. This is mainly because organisations have made the mistake of using the ISO 9001/2 models to implement the system, rather than using ISO 9004-1, as intended - a fact which could lead us to conclude that ISO 9000 itself is at fault. However, the fact that ISO 9000 is soundly based on essentially the same management principles as the EFQM excellence model is a key consideration. If an organisation adopts ISO 9000 in a spirit of continual improvement and in accordance with its principles, then it will implement it successfully 

Jim Wade has an international corporate background, from project engineer to board-level management with two IT multinationals. Wade is now a director of Wantage-based company Advanced Training and also initiated and continues to facilitate the Business Improvement Network (www.bin.co.uk), which offers free information and subsidised workshops on continual business improvement. He can be contacted on e-mail: jim.wade@a-t.co.uk.