

Integrated Quality Management Systems – Twelve Top Tips

All businesses are run to make money, but how do we achieve this? Some businesses are in it for the short-term, make the sale don't worry about the service and move onto the next customer – these types of business don't get very much repeat business and probably don't survive long before they are wound up and the owner starts again with a new business, one that is fated to go the same as the first. Businesses that survive are more likely to be those that take time to consider how they operate and are concerned about providing their customers with good service. After all a satisfied customer is more likely to return and give you referrals. How can we achieve such a system?

One way to achieve this would be to consider adopting an Integrated Quality Management System approach that looks not only at the product/service that is provided but how it is provided and considers internal controls for providing the product/service in a **CONSISTENT** manner whilst giving the company impetus to **CONTINUALLY** improve.

1- Know your Product/Service:

At the heart of every business are a range of products and/or services that are sold to your customers. To put it simply, without these products/services your business would not exist. So take the time to know and understand what you sell.

If you make a product then you should understand the factors that affect the production and have measures in place to restrict those factors that impair your production.

If you sell a product then you should not only take the time to understand the functions of the product and which of these functions are valued by the customer but also understand what can go wrong with the product and how you can support the customer should this happen.

If you sell a service then take time to understand what the customer wants from that service and why you are best person to provide it.

2- **K**now Who Your Customers Are:

Who are your customers? Take the time to find out why some people buy from you and some don't – and what you need do to get those that don't buy from you to change their minds.

Customers may not only be those that buy from you; as examples they may be those that seek your help with information or guidance or could be colleagues on a committee or in an organization that need your input to complete a task. How you deal with these individuals may not get you a sale today but it may help build several sales in the future.

3- **E**licit Customer Feedback – And When You Get It, USE IT!:

How do you know what your customers want and that you are providing it? Don't work on the assumption that they must be happy because they are buying from on repeat business. Talk to your customers, send out satisfaction forms, ask your customers not only what you did right but what do you need to improve upon, use any complaints you receive. Once you have gathered this information, use it to learn its lessons and improve.

When you visit a customer have questions ready to ask about how they perceive your service, note what they say, record it and use it!

At regular intervals (not too often!) send out feedback forms, when you get them back read them. If there are things of concern then 'phone the customer to get more information, use the information and **IMPROVE**.

4- **I**mplement Controls:

If you are a manufacturer then you know the key parameters for your product, place control limits around these parameters to ensure you always produce an acceptable product. If the parameters move out of control then production may be stopped and the problem fixed at source.

Similarly, if you are a service provider then you will have key parameters to that service that you can monitor and control; the only difference is that if the service moves out of

control the customer is more likely to be aware of the problem than if you monitor a production line.

If you sell someone else's product then make use of the products specification to control what you sell. Specifications can provide a description of the product and gives your customer an idea of what they are buying. Using (recent) historical data for each specification point you can set your own acceptable limits beyond which you know will be unacceptable to your customer and therefore to you.

5- **C**ontrol your Documentation

You wouldn't intentionally give a customer a copy of an outdated brochure for a new, enhanced product and you wouldn't give a customer an old price list so why run the risk of your workforce using outdated procedures to produce the product/service? Put in controls to prevent this – incorporate a system that means only the most up-to-date documents are available to your staff. Let them know that these are the only documents to be used, where to find them and when they change.

6- **C**ontrol your Records

Records are really a special form of document; as a template they should be subject to the same controls as your other documents but once they have been used their importance as a record of an event means they need extra controls. A written record informs us of the past, it tells us what was produced, how it was produced, who produced it, what happened to it and its current status. Without written evidence of what was produced/provided/agreed or sent then we can't plan for the future.

7- **U**nderstand your Problems

When something goes wrong we can either ignore it or fix it. If we want to be an improving business then we can't ignore errors – they need to be fixed.

When dealing with problems it may not be the case that the simplest or most immediate answer is the correct one. When faced with a problem ask yourself why it occurred, when you arrive at an answer question it, and continue asking questions until you no longer arrive at feasible or logical answers it is likely to be at this point the last logical answer you arrived at was the root cause of the issue. When you reach this point you can use the

answer to produce a correction to the problem; but once the correction is applied don't think that's the job done – check to see if it has solved the original problem, if it hasn't them back to the drawing board!!

8- **T**rain your Staff

Your business is only as good as the staff you employ, so make the most of their abilities and get them involved in wanting the business to succeed. Train them in the systems and procedures you use and update that training at regular intervals either through formalised training presentations or through less formal means such as “toolbox sessions”. Develop training programmes to enhance their skills and, where applicable encourage them to participate in continual professional development courses.

Whilst you do this, remember to keep records of all training that is undertaken.

9- **A**pprove your Suppliers

Your reputation and that of your business is only as good as the products/services you buy from your suppliers. If they fail to deliver, or give you substandard goods then your customer will only remember that you let them down, not that you were let down by your supplier. For all critical suppliers, go through an approvals process to help select the level of quality you want for your reputation and if they don't come up to the quality that you demand, then change them!

10- **C**ontrol your Subcontractors

The customer isn't usually concerned if you use subcontractors in your business, all they see are people working for you, so anything the subcontractor may do (or not do) will reflect on you. Make sure you approve your subcontractors, they should agree to work the way you want them to work and deal with customers the way you want them to deal with customers. It's your business they are supporting so make sure the image reflects you in a positive light.

11- **A**udit your System

You run the best business that there is! How do you know that? Well, it's **YOUR** business so it must be the best, mustn't it?

To ensure that your business is running as it should, regularly check your systems. Check to see if they are running the way you expect and if not correct them, don't wait for a customer to find a problem.

12- **R**eview your System

Remember, it's your company, regularly review it to check that it is working the way you want it to work. Look at the number of complaints you are receiving – are they going up or down? How is your internal audit programme working – is it looking at the right areas? What is the customer feedback telling you – are you satisfying your customers? Have there been any issues with suppliers? You get the picture!

After all this is done – learn from experience and plan for success.