

Certifying the Certifier

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Over a three-year period Quality Management Company improved itself from the inside out—and became ISO certified in the process.

THOMAS FULLER SAID, “HE DOES NOT BELIEVE WHO DOES NOT LIVE ACCORDING TO HIS BELIEF.” For years we at Quality Management Company, LLC (QMC)—the AISC subsidiary charged with conducting steel fabricator and erector quality management system audits—had been pushing our program participants to do something that we were not committed to doing ourselves.

When I took the reins in 2004, I wish I’d known the vast improvements that implementing the ISO 9001:2000 system would bring to QMC. I realize now that it’s not about the audit, but rather a way of doing business every single day. The procedures we’ve set in motion and now adhere to have directly lead to improvements in our communication, problem-solving, customer satisfaction, and more. We incorporate ISO elements, such as reviews of customer complaints and internal corrective actions, into our staff meeting agendas. As a group we discuss the root cause of an issue and what we can do in the future to prevent a reoccurrence. We compile the feedback we receive from our satisfaction surveys and review it on a quarterly basis, searching for trends and meaningful ways to improve the level of service we provide to our program participants.

The road to an effective quality management system, and ultimately our ISO 9001:2000 certification, was long and challenging, but in the end it proved to be invaluable. The following story—warts and all—is an internal, firsthand account of how QMC has evolved over the past three years. Hopefully, it will serve as inspiration to any fabricator or erector who is considering becoming certified but doesn’t know where to begin or what to expect. The quick answer is to take things in steps. As we often say around the office: “How do you eat an elephant? One piece at a time!”

The following journal entries chronicle QMC’s sometimes-painful path towards ISO certification:

July 1, 2004: Day one as responsible party in charge of QMC and AISC Certification

Since accepting the job a month ago I’ve learned that:

- Certified companies are upset because engineers aren’t maintaining requirements for AISC Certification in their specifications.

- AISC just introduced a new certification program for building fabricators, an apparently unwelcome change for fabricators resistant to change. And efforts to educate the specifiers about the new program were weak at best.

- The number of certified fabricators is decreasing.

- The number of complaints regarding QMC is on the rise. I love a challenge!

July 2, 2004: Day two

The manager of administration just gave her one-week notice. That’s more of a challenge than I’d hoped for. She doesn’t have anything written down that would give me or her replacement any indication of what to do or how to do it. She has two direct reports. One started three weeks ago—enough said. The second has accepted an offer in another department. It’s my second day and the team is already shrinking.

July 6, 2004: Technically still in my first week

The president just walked out of my office. He received what he described as his weekly call from a disgruntled program participant. He’s worried. So am I, but I assured him it would be fine. On the bright side, we have our first goal: Keep the president’s phone from ringing regarding certification and audits.

July 9, 2004: A lesson in customer service

I spent the afternoon discussing customer service with a QMC staffer after I overheard him telling a fabricator participant, “Yeah, your materials are in my stack...I’ll get to it when I get to it.” This isn’t his first offense. He’s one of two original team members remaining, but we’re considering “voting him off the island.” I’m held hostage knowing that beyond his rudeness toward customers, I have little understanding of his role and responsibilities.

October 14, 2004: Days turn to weeks turn to months

Captain Helpful was indeed voted off the island. There is something liberating in knowing that things really can’t get any worse. In three months we’ve assembled a brand new team and are starting to find our way. I feel like a dog in a butcher shop: everywhere I turn there is an opportunity for improvement. Unfortunately, we

Quality Corner is a monthly feature that covers topics ranging from how to specify a certified company to how long it takes to become a certified company. If you are interested in browsing our electronic archive, please visit www.aisc.org/QualityCorner.

Lessons Learned the Hard Way

MAKE THE TIME! If you spend more time being proactive, it will save you reactive time down the road, and you'll have far fewer fires to put out.

PEOPLE! As Jim Collins suggests in his best-selling book *Good to Great*, get the right people on the bus. People will pleasantly surprise you. Don't underestimate them!

CHANGE IS GOOD! Don't be afraid to change the way you do things. It just might be for the better.

INVOLVE EVERYONE! You waste time trying to guess what people in your organization do. So, ask them or have them write it down with the understanding that not everyone dreams of being a technical writer. You can always fine-tune it later.

PRIORITIZE! Focus on what is customer-critical for your organization. Don't waste valuable time on procedures that fall into the "would be nice" category.

WRITE DOWN WHAT YOU REALLY DO! In the future you have the opportunity to revise your procedures as you identify gaps and inefficiencies. In the beginning consider only what you currently do, not what you'd do in your "perfect world."

KEEP IT SIMPLE! A well-written procedure should be two pages maximum. Any more than that is probably a combination of procedures. As for your quality manual, if it can double as a doorstop, you've gone too far. Less really is more; any necessary updates and revisions (yes, you will have revisions) will be minimized.

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS! If a flow chart can clearly communicate the steps of your procedure, use it. A flow chart with enough information is a procedure.

FIGHT IT OUT! If you have the "right people on the bus" and they're passionate about what they do, you can expect some disagreements. Don't fret; constructive disagreements are healthy. Keep an open mind and make room for other perspectives. This will also help you get buy-in from everyone involved.

YOU NEED BUY-IN! You don't want people going through the motions just because the boss said so. This is a system that will only be as strong as its weakest link. You can use the company grapevine to find out where your weak links are. If they are the right people, it may be as simple as enhancing communication. In a worst-case scenario, they may not prove to be a good fit for your organization after all.

GO BEYOND WHAT'S REQUIRED! Certification programs like ISO 9001 and the AISC *Certification Standard for Steel Building Structures* require certain specific procedures. However, odds are you will need more procedures to accurately describe the processes you use in your business. Keep thinking, "If we had to start with all new people tomorrow, would we have the tools in place for a new team to pick up where the old team left off?"

REVIEW PROCEDURES TOGETHER! Consider it a valuable training opportunity; you'll learn a lot about the jobs people do. Look for gaps and overlaps. Remember to keep attendance lists; they will serve as your documentation of training.

DON'T INSIST ON PERFECTION! Procedures are living documents. If you're committed to continuous improvement and the evolution of your quality management system, know that tweaking your procedures will be an essential part of that evolution.

EXPECT CORRECTIVE ACTIONS! If you're convinced that no quality management system is perfect, then you shouldn't be surprised by the need for corrective action. Don't despair! These are valuable learning experiences and an essential part of the continual improvement process. They will help you identify gaps in your procedures, training needs, and more.

TRAINING, TRAINING, AND MORE TRAINING! Be sure everyone involved has a clear understanding of their role in the organization's quality management system. Remember, this may be new for them as well.

BE PATIENT! This will take time, especially if you are starting from scratch.

CELEBRATE! No one said it would be easy. Make time to celebrate with your team. They work hard. They have a lot on their plates and still make time to contribute toward developing your quality management system. Be sure to thank them and recognize their contributions.

are still in a highly reactive environment with little time or resources available to devote to strategic planning and process improvement. Things fall through the cracks everyday: lost payments, certificates issued to the wrong company (or to the right company with the wrong date or address), etc. On the bright side, the president is spending less time in my office.

November 17, 2004: Ouch

I'm starting to understand why our participants are so angry. We introduced a new program to more than 500 AISC Certified building fabricators. We gave them three years to adopt the new program, offered a few early seminars on the new criteria, and then turned our backs on them. They have until the end of 2005 to be audited to the new criteria, and out of the 500, we've had approximately 75 early adopters. It's starting to look like 2005 will be a tough year too.

January 5, 2005: ISO?

We are setting goals! At today's staff meeting we optimistically discussed the notion of becoming ISO 9001:2000 certified. I don't know what's involved, but I'm in favor of anything that would formalize and improve how we do business. The first few months felt as though we were recreating the wheel. We have a good team with a passion for helping our customers and the industry; that's a great start.

March 14, 2005: Are these the worst of times?

Reality check: The final year of transition to the AISC *Certification Standard for Steel Building Structures* is as bad as we expected. In spite of the resources and FAQs we've compiled on our web site and our new "let us help" customer-centric attitude, it appears it's "too little, too late" for some. Companies are struggling to make sense of the criteria and apply it to how they currently do business. We hear a lot of "I've been doing it this way for 30 years and..." More important, many of these companies are struggling to keep their doors open in the wake of steel price volatility. They are bidding on jobs at the 11th hour only to find that they are one of 11 bidders. It's apparent that becoming AISC Certified isn't the first thing they think about when getting out of bed in the morning. Yes, doing quality work is important to them, but like QMC they are putting out fires and struggling to find the

resources to devote to overhauling their quality management system.

QMC is pretty much in the same boat when it comes to our own quality management system and ISO certification: It'll have to wait. We don't have the time this year for anything extra. We have fewer than five procedures currently documented. Our customer service program is entirely reactive. Bottom line: The squeaky wheel is getting the oil.

January 2006: Ready, Set... ISO!

Today we set our goals for the year. This will be the year for ISO!

April 11, 2006: A step in the right direction

The ISO books have arrived! I just opened up the Q9001-2000, *Quality Management Systems – Requirements*. It is written in English, but it really seems like a foreign language to me. "Product Realization"—what is that? Oh, this is going to take some getting used to...

May 24, 2006: My first ISO lesson

ISO requires that you implement a quality management system (QMS) that incorporates eight principles: customer focus, leadership, involvement of people, process approach, system approach to management, continual improvement, factual approach to decision making, and mutually beneficial supplier relationships. In turn, you develop a quality manual and set your quality policy and objectives. There are also six required procedures that must be set into place: control of documents, control of quality records, internal audit, control of nonconforming products, corrective action, and preventive action. Whew, this is going to be a lot of work for a company starting from scratch with only six employees!

August 21, 2006: Quality Policy

We finally agreed on our Quality Policy. I thought this would be the easy part, but I was wrong. It was an agenda item at no fewer than three staff meetings. Each time, we found ourselves debating words and their meaning. We felt the policy would become the cornerstone to our journey, so we took it seriously. Not unlike a mission statement we wanted something that everyone could get behind and support. And in the end:

It will be the Policy of Quality Management Company to ensure and improve the quality of steel fabrication and erection through audits and certification.

October 1, 2006: Customer satisfaction

Today we launched our satisfaction survey. It is our first vehicle for proactively collecting customer feedback, and it's long overdue.

October 27, 2006: Identify procedures and prioritize them

At today's staff meeting we made a list of the procedures required to conduct business. These procedures are above and beyond those required by ISO. We came up with more than 20! Then we prioritized the list and assigned authors. A priority of 1 indicates the item is customer-critical and therefore essential to how we do business. A 3 represents a procedure that is useful, but perhaps not invoked on a regular basis.

November 1, 2006: Training for internal auditors

Today's training for internal auditors was long and tedious, but I learned a lot. At times it felt a bit daunting because it's so far from anything I've ever done in the past. I suspect I won't feel comfortable with the notion until I've actually done it.

November 10, 2006: Writing our first procedure

Yet another lesson! I thought writing procedures would be an exercise of simply listing the steps in a process, but there is more to it than that. You need a scope, assignment of responsibility, related records, and a revision history. I was surprised that we could still fit most of our procedures onto a single page.

November 29, 2006: Writing more procedures

We've been meeting as a team once a week and taking turns helping each other write procedures. We pick one procedure and allow no more than an hour. Today we discussed the procedure for scheduling of annual audits. Some jobs are a lot more complicated than I realized.

January 18, 2007: The internal audit, part one

As it turns out, the challenge of conducting the internal audit is a function of who is involved in the audit. Our client services coordinator was tasked with interviewing me about the subject management responsibility for her portion of the internal audit. We were both nervous! She didn't like being the one to put the boss

under the microscope. As the team leader I felt pressured to have all the right answers. We both survived and learned a lot in the process.

January 24, 2007: Our first management review meeting

We reviewed our QMS in its entirety for the very first time. We discussed the areas required by ISO such as our quality policy, goals, customer feedback, and the results of our internal audit. (We had ten corrective actions!)

February 19, 2007: Training each other on our procedures

It was an uncomfortably long meeting and we only made it through ten procedures. The good news is that we discussed a lot of gaps and areas of overlap.

April 9, 2007: Day one of our ISO 9001:2000 audit

For many years now we have required our fabricators and erectors to go through a rigorous audit in order to obtain their AISC certification. Today, the tables were turned and QMC was put under the microscope.

April 10, 2007: Day two of the audit

It's finally over! Total corrective action requests: four. All in all, it was a very positive experience. Our auditor had a lot of useful suggestions for how we could streamline our processes. It felt like he was a part of the team. I hope that our own auditors instill the same feeling in our program participants.

April 12, 2007: CARs closed

We closed our third and final corrective action today!

April 20, 2007: It's official!

We received our ISO 9001:2000 certificate today! This was a rewarding team-building exercise. And now it's time to plan a party for the team; they've worked so hard!

Today: Leading by example

We invested a lot of time and energy in building an effective quality management system and obtaining ISO 9001:2000 certification. Many people have asked, "Was it worth it?" The answer is, "Absolutely!" ISO isn't perfect, but it gave us a logical framework for developing our system, and in the end

it has paid off. We continue to strive for excellence with the understanding that there is always room for improvement. Yes, we still make mistakes. Things still fall through the cracks, but this happens much less often these days. ISO has taken us to a level that might not have been attainable a few years ago. We take great pride in our accomplishment and look to the future with an open mind.

If you are considering AISC Certification as a means of enhancing your business, let us help you find your way. We learned the hard way, but you don't have to. For more information call 312.670.7520 or e-mail us at certinfo@aisc.org. **MSC**

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