

ISO 9001 – The Myths (part II)

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When I'm discussing with clients (or potential clients) their ISO 9001 certification needs, I try to mentally keep log of each time I hear something that is totally "off point". My biggest problem is that this happens so regularly, I have a difficult time keeping track. For a standard that is only around 35 pages long and, all things considered, not terribly prescriptive in detail, there seems to be an awful lot of misinformation going around.

So here we are again, to address a few more "myths" surrounding the ISO 9001 standard and its requirements:

1. *ISO 9001 certification is expensive* – What is expensive? I won't say this is going to be free but, individual perceptions of "expensive" aside, achieving ISO 9001 certification can be done at a reasonable cost, and quite often, the cost is far outweighed by the benefits certification brings (e.g., fewer customer audits, eligibility for new contracts, third-party recognition, etc.). The projects that we've all heard about, those which have become truly "expensive", are usually a result of poor project management, improper or "dead-end" implementation, and/or using predatory consultants who are just maximizing their hourly billing.
2. *Certification takes years* – Achieving ISO 9001 certification takes awhile, but if you're committed to success and have all the resource you need, there a light at the end of the tunnel; if you're still not making any progress after several months, something is probably wrong. Like cost, time is a relative term and susceptible to the same factors as above. Unless your organization is extremely large and complex, most projects can be completed in a year or even much less.
3. *The more comprehensive a system is, the better* - This item relates directly to the two items that precede it; expense and implementation time can increase exponentially if a system isn't scaled improperly to the size of the organization that it's being applied to. A lot of organizations attempt to over-document, over-control and over-prescribe their processes and, as a result, end up with a bureaucratic nightmare of paperwork and non-value adding activities that really aren't even required.
4. *Everything must be perfect at the start* – One of the fundamental premises upon which the ISO 9001 standard is based is continual improvement. This includes the organization's processes, products and its management system. In layman's terms, the system continues to develop and get better over time. While a "perfect" system is the ultimate goal, this probably isn't a reasonable expectation starting out a day one. You can end up wasting considerable time and other resources trying to build a "Cadillac" while what you really need to get started is a "Silverado" truck. Start with a system that works and that achieves desired outcomes and fine-tune as you go forward. Your specific needs will changes as time goes by as well, so remember that perfection is always a moving target.
5. *Audits are scary and make us nervous* – If your organization is frightened of audits, something is wrong. An audit is an assessment activity to ensure that the quality

management system is working as planned. If your organization is gripped with fear, you probably have a cultural issue where audit results are associated more with their punitive consequences rather than their beneficial aspects. An audit should be used by the organization to evaluate and improve the way their management system operates. Managers need to understand that this is a means for identifying opportunities for improvement.

6. *Let consultants do everything* – You can't take a "hands off" approach and let a consultant run your management system. A consultant can be a considerable help in developing, implementing and maintaining your management system, however you must own it. Systems that are highly consultant-dependent are reliable only while the consultant is directly involved; they tend to lapse (or worse) in the consultant's absence. Effective management systems are not only implemented within an organization, they are infused into its daily operations and activities. This level of performance can't be achieved by an outside resource that's only around on a periodic basis.
7. *Maintaining an ISO 9001 QMS is time-intensive* – I'm not going to say it won't take a fair amount of work, but a well designed, properly-scaled QMS should be sustainable using an acceptable amount of organizational resources. This is actually a criterion that ISO 9001 requires the organization to consider as part of its management review function (see clause 5.6). If your organization's QMS is bringing your operations or productivity to a stand-still, you need to consider whether changes are necessary to the QMS before adding additional personnel. Quite often, it's the self-inflicted bureaucracy of the system that's at fault.

The first step in the proper development and implementation of a management system is separating myth from fact. At the rate things are going, maybe there will be a "Myths III" in the not-to-distant future – stay tuned...

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