

### 3 key areas of quality planning

It is somewhat of a cliché to say that quality should be at the heart of everything a business does. But, when we start to dig to get a better understanding of what makes good quality we start to see why this adage holds so much value.

Quality is associated with understanding what customers and stakeholders want and how we are going to deliver. If we are running a business and we don't understand what customers want we are likely to get into difficulty. This forms the first phase of quality, planning. To undertake the background research and preparation before we even start to sell our first unit.

It sounds rather obvious. Surely, we should understand our customer wants. But history is littered with examples from the Blackberry phone to Blockbuster Video. Customers' demands moved forward, the company did not.

So why does this happen?

Here are 3 potential reasons

#### **1. Poor identification and harvesting of knowledge from customers.**

The relationship between the customer and the supplier is not working as well as it should. The supplier needs to ask questions of the customer about what they want and need. This information should be carefully fostered, nurtured and developed, before being transferred to the wider business. Too often rigid processes affect this relationship, restricting suppliers ability to think on their feet and add genuine value to the customer by solving their problem. Maybe the listed solution does not work, but perhaps from another perspective it could be a better fit. The competitor who can do this and satisfy the customer will win the sale and deepen the relationship.

#### **2. Poor understanding and communication of customer requirements now and in the future**

Gaining the information from listening and questioning forms the basis to understand what the customer wants. Suppliers teams need to analyse and evaluate this information effectively to ensure they are clear on these requirements. Decisions taken at this stage are vital in the quality process and should be based upon accurate and unbiased information. Part of the downfall of Blockbuster's business was the belief of 'we've always done it like this' and not the hard evidence that was there in the market clearly indicating customers were changing.

If this is not understood it makes the already difficult phase of transferring this information to the wider business all the harder. The receiver and the transmitter of this information must be in tune, or to quote a phrase it could be 'lost in translation'. This method of communication should be 2 way, with positive checks to ensure accuracy is maintained at all times. Alternatively, imagine the transmitter did not understand what the customer wanted. Then, it would make no difference how accurate the transfer was. This leads to waste, cost and lost sales.

#### **3. Inability to match requirements against capabilities and realise the value of the product to the customer and the standards needed**

Once the customer's needs have been understood and communicated this is transformed into a product. Therefore, it is essential that the supplier has the capability to produce. De Havilland, an aircraft manufacturer pioneered the passenger jet aircraft in the late 1950's and early 60's with the Comet. Until a structural fault in the design caused several catastrophic accidents. The constraint was that De Havilland did not have sufficient capability to deliver what the customer wanted. E.g., safe air travel, the market was then lost to Boeing, who did.

Quality means we have to consistently meet our customers expectations. If we do not have sufficient or the right type of capability, we can't achieve this. If we can link the two we can start to determine what standards we need in place to ensure we can.

There is also a further point that we need to be able to communicate the value of a suppliers product to the customer. If we don't know the true value and how it meets the customers needs we are not likely to receive a sale.

There is no substitute for a robust quality management system in a business to monitor and maintain standards. The question is if we don't know what those standards are in the first instance how can we set these up? This information comes from questioning and analysing what the customer is telling us and then innovating a solution that matches our capabilities. At the heart of all three of these are good fundamental human skills or critical thinking, lateral thinking and problem solving, which can be learnt and developed to ensure quality planning is right every time.

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