Quality Systems – Managing the risks in animal management

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What is the background to all of this?

In its basic form a quality system is a management tool that all companies or organizations can set up to formalise their operation. By *formalise* I mean to capture 'in written form' in a logical manner just how they provide their services, assemble their bicycles, mix up their medicines, brew their beer, etc. The process does not just cover the recipes or activity schedules they use, but every aspect of their operation, including where they source their ingredients, how they package, transport and store their products, what are the acceptable alternative components should their primary choice be temporarily unavailable. In short – the *entire deal*!

The need for '*formalising ones act*' started years ago in the manufacturing sector where trade initiatives from other countries (notably Japan) put increasing pressure on traditional Western markets with similar products, at competitive prices. Western manufacturers thought they needed 'an edge' to show they were better than their competition, so an international standard (ISO 9000) was established. If a company developed an internal quality system and earned accreditation under ISO 9000, then that company was making a statement – "We always produce the best quality product, reliably, consistently, efficiently and on time" An added bonus to tidying up the company's act with earning the standard was that it usually got all of the 'bugs' out of their processes and they were able to reduce waste, use resources more efficiently, and therefore make more profit, which gave them a few choices. One of which was that they could offer their product at a competitive price and keep out the Asian manufacturers. This was a pleasant state of affairs until the Asian industry sector embraced the ISO way of life too and rapidly caught up with, (and maybe passed) the Western manufacturers. Either way, world consumers benefited from an overall improvement in the quality of just about everything that is or was manufactured and offered for sale as a product.

Not long after the manufacturing sector had adopted the quality system as a formal operational management tool, the service sector of industry entered the fray and a slightly different standard (ISO 9001) was established to allow companies to join in that provided services eg. airlines, travel agents, engineers, tradesmen, etc.

What exactly is a quality system? …. How do we put one in place?

There are a number of elements that make up the quality system. First off you will need to identify exactly **what** your services are. You should make a list of everything you do in an operational sense (if your council operates its animal services in-house), or in the case of an animal management contractor, the entire list of services that your client council is paying you to carry out. Once you have identified the '**what**' you will need to develop and declare the '**how**' (the exact detail of what makes up the '**what**'). This is usually where the fun starts. Traditionally in an 'informal' system (i.e. no system) six different AMO's will be using six different ways of investigating a dog attack, patrol an area, etc. There will likely be as many different opinions of **how** to go about the work in general and to complicate things there may be more than one way of doing the same thing that is considered acceptable.

What the '**how**' does is to provoke discussion (ideally among all of the staff who carry out the operational services) on what is the 'right' or 'correct' way to do things. If you have good alternatives, then you have to decide on the one best overall method or approach, and get 100% buy-in that EVERYONE on the team will agree to do things by the same method in future. Simply put, before getting everyone to do things 'by the book' you first have to write 'the book' (and ensure it is workable).

Once you have identified and agreed on exactly '**how**' you will carry out your services, you will have to look at the forms and letters, brochures, pamphlets, etc that you use in the course of carrying out your tasks. In a compliance and enforcement activity like animal control, you will likely be faced with a HUGE 'paper war', and not only in different types of 'standard forms' but in versions, updates and re-prints. Once you have nailed down and identified every different piece of paper you need to perform all of the tasks then put the rest in the rubbish bin. Any left over, including obsolete or outdated forms do not add to the efficiency of your operation. Another way of putting this is "Get rid of the crap in the system!" In ISO terminology this is called establishing '**document control**', and is vital to a well-managed formal operation. You need to be thoroughly aware of every piece of paper in use in your operation, the occasions when they are used, who uses them, and importantly when they are updated or revised (so you can destroy the previous issues, or the ones that talk about 'last year's rules'). There is nothing more confusing to staff and customers than having conflicting messages and rules from different sources.

The next step is to establish a workable method of **quality control**. You are going to need to effectively monitor just how well your staff are doing things 'by the book'. And what's more you are going to have to be able to PROVE how well you are doing to an independent external auditor on a regular basis. This might sound a bit like 'Big Brother' is looking over your shoulder, but you are not going to be successfully accredited under ISO 9001 without a proper independent **audit regime**. This can be quite a test of staff commitment and organizational culture but it is vital. The audit regime is closely followed by the establishment of the process (again fully audited) that you use to analyse, correct and deal with all issues of **non-conformance**, or in straight language – "How do we fix the Screw-Ups!" (and what's more – prove that we have fixed them effectively).

Once the basics of the quality system have been put in place you need to address the issue of staff training. Educating your staff in exactly '**how**' to perform their tasks is now much simpler, as you have just recently formalised the '**how**' where it relates to the day to day processes, which makes the establishment of efficient training standards and processes much more straightforward and visible. Your efforts in setting up the training manual should be guided by '**outcomes**', i.e. you will need to clearly identify exactly what result (or outcome) you want from every aspect of training and staff instruction and make sure that your training activity delivers everything that fits in with your main services.

Finally, you will need to set up a performance reporting system that provides your Council (or your client) with clear, accurate data on exactly '**how**' you are providing the agreed services. You don't have to start measuring everything as this can be a waste of time and effort, but you *do* need to identify what the key performance indicators are that relate to your activities, and then measure how well you carry the out these services.

You will find that the development and establishment of the quality system is quite likely a difficult 'journey', but the learning curve you will experience will be invaluable, as the 'journey' involves you looking under every rock, in every crevice of your operation and will compel you to effectively deal with all issues you encounter. You will also take 'waste' out of your operation, and replace it with efficiency. It is worth doing for the 'journey' alone.

Why would I consider setting up a Quality System? – WIIFM?

With any service that is provided there may be a wide range of opinions on exactly how that service is being (or has been) carried out. Every action or activity is potentially open to personal bias and one person's idea of "A job well done" is frequently contradicted by another's view of "What a failure!", when both parties are discussing exactly the same performance. Unlike a manufactured product where it is relatively easy to point out defects or faults, i.e. "The wheels fell off", or "My sirloin steak tastes like it came last in the 1967 Melbourne Cup", a service result is more vulnerable to the risk of unfair opinion.

Unfair criticism can be harmful and hard to combat unless you have in place a robust and transparent mechanism that defines measures and scientifically reports on the level of services involved. We call this mechanism a Quality System. A simple observation is that the system keeps everybody honest. So when an elected politician or the media makes an ill-informed statement that is critical of a particular department's performance, then their view can be contested by you from a position of strength and the security of proven, audited data that always tends to prevail against an argument that is based upon hearsay or emotional input.

We need to embark upon the Quality System journey with our eyes wide open. A good, well set up system with give everyone absolute transparency, the down-side of which means that all of your errors and mistakes will be hung out on display, along with your successes and achievements. Some people may find this concept difficult to grasp, let alone comfortable to live with on a day to day basis. A good word to describe this (sometimes unusual) situation is "Accountability", and it is indeed an elusive 'Will-o'-the-wisp' concept in some organizational cultures. Nevertheless accountability has been proven over the years to be a worthwhile nettle to grasp and adopt as a way of operating.

WIIFM.? – "What's in it for me?"

There are many benefits and advantages to operating under the formal umbrella of a quality system. However not all of these advantages are fully understood and probably lack visibility at the start. After a while the full significance of what you have achieved will hit home and you will 'never be without one'. Some of the benefits will be:

- A thorough understanding of exactly what 'makes your business tick',
- You will have solved all of the problems encountered during the 'journey',
- You will be able to manage your resources more efficiently (and effectively),
- You will be incurring less waste (saving money),
- You will be communicating better (more effectively) with your customers,
- Your bosses will have an improved appreciation of what you actually do,
- You will have blown away various 'smoke screens' and grey areas from your operation and replaced these with a welcome transparency,

- You will be able to more effectively respond to media or political challenges because you will have better data more readily to hand to support your arguments,
- You will likely incur fewer staff related internal issues because you will have quantified and formalised every aspect of their jobs,
- You will have closed many enforcement and compliance loopholes that some of your dog-owning 'customers' have traditionally wriggled through, and
- When problems or issues do occur in future, you will have in place a tried and tested procedure for quickly dealing with them.

You will more than likely add to this list as you get greater experience operating under a quality system. The sooner you make your mind up to get one, then the sooner you can reap the rewards.

Who should be involved?

In short – everybody. When you are going through every process you use, and are trying to nail down exactly which approach is the best one to run with, then your project team MUST consist of the staff who are tasked with the responsibility of actually doing the work. If you engage an external consultant to 'write the book', then you will blow any chance you will ever have of making it succeed. If staff are not involved in developing the system then they will NEVER buy into the end result and use it as their 'bible' on a daily basis. After all – it will be '**your**' system and not '**theirs**'. This is the first challenge you will face, and will continue to face throughout the journey. You have to make it '**our**' system right from the start. As you go through the various stages of development it is a good idea (some would say vital) to identify areas where you can delegate decision making and the exercising of good judgement to the staff at the 'sharp end' of the business. There is nothing more disheartening to have to keep requesting permission to do things all the time from someone sitting at a desk miles away from you. Hand in hand with 'delegation' comes 'empowerment'. With competent well-trained and motivated staff, working within the formality of a quality system, the bulk of the operational decisions and actions should happen without senior management involvement.

The 'passion' to achieve an operational quality system should originate from the 'Boss'.

Without a total and unswerving commitment from a senior management level there is little point in even setting out on the journey. You will fail without this top-driven support, pressure and commitment.

By all means look at using some external assistance in the project (a consultant) to help maintain a momentum on the journey but remember that most of the resources you will need to achieve your objective will come from the 'experts within' i.e. your own staff. You will need to make allowances for the inevitable conflict between the extra demands of the project on their time, and the normal pressure of their day to day duties. Just remember, that whenever there is a competition for a staff member's time between their normal activities and 'project' work, then the familiar work wins every time (unless given guidance and management direction from above.

A good role for an external consultant is for them to manage and control the 'time-line' to ensure you all achieve your project milestones, and just as importantly to keep you informed when you start to lose momentum.

You should always use some form of expert opinion from knowledgeable outsiders, who emanate from within your industry. It is a sound practice to seek a formal 'peer reviewer' who can pick up on the (seemingly myriad) things you have missed on the first draft of each phase.

If there already exists an accepted model of 'Best Practice' for your industry, then by all means embrace it ('Its always cheaper to do this than reinventing the wheel').

Once you have developed your draft processes to a final stage then arrange for them to be signed off by someone representing your policy or 'specifier' department of Council. This will ensure that every part of your operational activities will be duly authorised by your policy people, making statements such as "I had no idea we (Council) got involved in those activities" a thing of the past.

Things to avoid, challenges, pitfalls

One of the prerequisites to the successful development of a quality system is the advisory partner you choose to assist and mentor you in the journey towards ISO accreditation. There are now many companies to choose from within the quality 'industry' that will be able to help you both in the development phase and, once you have qualified, in the ongoing audits. You will definitely need a specialist quality industry accreditation agency to assist and guide you through each stage so will need to make an allowance for the cost of this service in your project budget.

As in all industries you will find that some are better than others, so it is advisable to 'shop around' before you commit to any one service provider not only for a quotation based on their scale of charges but for references too. It is a good idea to ask for a list of their previous and current clients, so that you may be given an opportunity to contact them and discuss how they felt about dealing with 'company X'.

The first quality manual/system I was involved with was not very successful. Admittedly it was within a manufacturing industry that required an incredibly high standard of product quality and consistency, but it did not function very effectively. Yes it was efficient, and painstakingly precise in its approach to mapping every detail of every process, but it was never fully effective because the employees charged with managing the processes as specified within the system did not use it much. It was efficient (in theory) but it was never effective. It was onerous to use and they never trusted it.

Why? Because even though the whole system was designed and specified by an internal 'quality team' (a good call), the team was managed and guided by an external 'Rocket Scientist' who viewed life as one large mathematical algorithm that deserved to be 'process mapped' to the 'nth' degree (a bad call). The end result was that even though ISO 9000 accreditation was gained, the subsequent audits were a nightmare as employees avoided using it 'en mass'. How could they be expected to accept this as their 'working Bible' when it came in six volumes, was as complicated as having to learn 'War & Peace' by heart (written in classical Klingon) and weighed a ton! The culture that developed was one of ridiculing the quality system, and trying to invent ways of working around it in order to accomplish even basic tasks.

The best way to avoid this sort of (reasonably common) pitfall is to make the number one statement in your system specification the 'KISS' principle (Keep It Simple – Stupid). The leaner and easier to read (and understand) that you can write your quality manual the better will be its acceptability by your operational team. Use fewer words with your descriptions, larger fonts, smaller, simpler words, etc. Better still why not get rid of text entirely and maximize the use of meaningful flow-charts. These are excellent to describe processes, and much easier to understand, especially in a service-based industry like animal management. Our current quality manual uses flow-charts for every process or 'Work Instruction' to cover every operational activity that we perform. Every employee who has an involvement with operational processes has their own copy, and they are referred to regularly on a daily basis as they actually work!

Anyone can easily understand just what goes on (or what 'should' go on) and our total operational services are transparent, which is appreciated by our clients.

Once the quality system has been developed and you have received ISO accreditation you should not drop your guard. A predictable consequence of involving all of your staff in the development of 'our' system will be ongoing pressure from interested (and motivated) individuals to seek to improve things even further. Once you have fired up people's enthusiasm to 'work smarter' you need to be prepared to make enhancements and formal changes that will make the 'beast' better.

This is not a bad thing, so get ready to listen to feedback and allow open discussion and criticism in the cause of 'quality improvement'. Who knows it might make everyone's life at work a lot more satisfying. It is an excellent idea to set up a formal in-house committee to deal with feedback and suggestions, and you should always view your quality system as a 'living entity', i.e. always open to improvement. Even the most junior employee will have an opinion and ideas concerning 'how things should be done', so ignore them at your Peril!

If you find that the company (or organisational) culture does not effectively allow this sort of bottom-up feedback or frank cross-level discussion then you need to change the culture. With the work environment changing to a more open and transparently honest place to work, you will find that the old management model of 'The boss is always right – right or wrong' will find itself under very real pressure to change with the times. It is amazing to discover just how many Dinosaurs did in fact survive the Ice Age, and are still out there, living and breathing, holding down management positions.

Declare open season on these living fossils and embrace a more enlightened style of management, as the 'bottom line' is that you will never be able to maximize your investment in a quality system if the company or management culture is not right.

Once you have started on the journey, then don't falter or let up on the pressure to change. Many organisations have embarked on this quest and many have fallen by the wayside. If you lose momentum or worse still grind to a halt, then all is not lost (at least in theory), you just need to crank it into life and start again. After all, the compelling and common sense reasons you chose to start the original journey have not changed at all, its just that now things are a little bit more urgent that you complete the job.

The real problem you face with starting up again after an initial failure is in retaining your staff credibility. It will be much more difficult to get them to believe you that this change is necessary, and their 'motivation factor' will only be a few points above minimum as they will have 'heard it all before', and you will be faced with at worst a hostile audience. In simple terms you in reality will only have one effective shot at getting this right, so do not attempt to even 'remove the handbrake' and start things rolling unless you, management and organisation have a total commitment to make it happen properly.

Conclusion

It is no mean feat to survive the journey and be accredited under ISO 9001 (or similar) and having a workable operational quality system to manage your business activities. You and the team deserve some congratulation and needless to say this is an excellent excuse for a celebration (if you need an excuse that is). What you have achieved is not easy, as many companies from all over the world have embarked on a similar journey but have given up when it got tough along the way.

You will be awarded a fancy framed certificate to hang in you office reception area, and be granted the right to use the ISO quality logo on your stationery, etc.

This stands for something. It is called 'Excellence' and is widely respected by other members of the business community.

Just be aware that the accreditation can be easily lost if you fail successive audits, and allow your new 'way of life' to falter or regress to your previous non-system. To avoid this happening all you need to do is to continue 'doing things by the book', and embed the quality way of working firmly in your organisational culture.

Good Luck with your Journey!

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About the Author

Barry Gillingwater was born and raised in London and left school for a career in the Royal Air Force as a pilot. He spent most of his service as an instructor leaving in 1973, before travelling to New Zealand in early '74.

He flew as a commercial pilot in NZ, mostly as a flight instructor, until leaving flying behind in the mid-eighties for a career change and new challenges (one of which was marriage). Further study brought qualifications in operational and logistics management, culminating in him holding positions of responsibility in multi-national businesses, specializing in process management, management systems and 'change management'. In 1990 Manukau City Council formed a local government business unit for various compliance activities, one of which was animal control, and Barry was hired as its inaugural General Manager. Around this time Barry and Trish became parents of sons Michael and Andrew, who arrived two years apart – life became quite hectic! During the next five years Barry restructured the business unit, upgraded processes, and totally realigned and improved the whole animal control operation. In 1995 he left Manukau City to form his own business consultancy, but retained an interest in the 'dog' operation. When Manukau advertised the animal control work for tender in 1999, Barry formed a new company, 'DSS Animal Management' and won the contract. The company still contracts the Manukau City animal control, and has added Wellington City Council, Transit NZ (State Highway and Motorway animal control) and other smaller councils, to its list of clients.

In 2001 DSS Animal Management was accredited with international quality standard ISO-9001, and since then the company's processes and 'work standards' have been hailed as being a benchmark for animal control work in NZ. The company has developed its own nationwide school education programme, which it has on-sold to other local authorities as part of their bite-prevention initiatives. In 2006 DSS opened NZ's first approved training school to train and qualify animal management officers from around NZ, an operation that is growing and expanding as word of its activities spreads through the industry. As for hobbies and interests, Barry doesn't fly any more but prefers to spend time out on Auckland's Waitemata Harbour catching fish with his sons (or anyone else who is keen on fishing). He is also a qualified Small Arms Instructor, and holds the position of 'Master Instructor' with the NZ Pistol Association. He is an accomplished marksman with most types of firearms.