Quality Leadership:
ISO9001:2015 - Breaking Down the Emphasis on Leadership
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*Wise leaders understand their own strengths, work to expand them, and
build teams that can provide leadership in all four modes – structural,
political, human resource, and symbolic.[1]*

Quality starts with a vision. Someone somewhere decided to create and sell a product or service with the expectation that it will be of value to a specific market. That vision starts with a leader at the top and extends throughout all employees of the company. To achieve the vision, it is important that leaders incorporate the following four frameworks in their organization:

> Structural – Set goals, policies, and procedures to establish boundaries.
> Political – Use their power to advocate for change and improvement.
> Human Resource – Identify needs, skills, and relationships of employees.
> Symbolic – Set the cultural tone and inspire employees.

These concepts set the baseline for what ISO9001:2015 is trying to achieve in a quality management system.

The updated ISO9001:2015 standard emphasizes the role of leadership in everything from accountability and compatibility with the strategic direction of the company, to promoting improvement and supporting the concept of process ownership as ambassadors to their areas of responsibility. There are many factors that come into play when discussing the role of leadership in a quality management system. This paper focuses on each of the leadership specific elements of the updated ISO9001:2015 standard, addresses the meaning of each one in the context of the four frameworks, and shows how any company can help ensure proper implementation.

Executive management leadership and commitment plays a critical role in setting the foundation for a successful ISO certified quality management system as well as ongoing efforts toward continual improvement. Executives must provide the structure and resources to set the foundation during implementation and through ongoing internal audits, corrective action, and continual improvement. ISO9001:2015 Section 5.1 (Leadership and commitment), Part 5.1.1 states that general top management shall demonstrate leadership and commitment with respect to the quality management system by:

A) *Taking accountability for the effectiveness of the quality management system. (Political)*

To take accountability for something means to be responsible for it. To be effective means that the system be active, useful, successful and provide value. Being responsible for the effectiveness of the entire quality management system is a significant commitment, and since the role of the management representative was eliminated in the new standard, this responsibility now lies in the hands of the executive management team and the managers that deal with day to day activities. Top executives are

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[1] Lee G. Bolman andTerrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 317.

ultimately responsible for the performance of their management team, and therefore the successful implementation of ISO.

Articles concerning companies being understaffed and overworked from an entry level employee to the highest levels of management are widely cited from the *Harvard Business Review*[2] to blogs. Businesses often see ISO as an extra burden that takes time away from day to day management tasks. What companies sometimes fail to recognize is that, if implemented properly, a quality management system can help the executive team set expectations that drive accountability. By establishing policies, procedures, work instructions and forms at the most critical control points, employees more clearly understand their role leading to more predictable actions and consistency throughout the organization. This consistency makes it easier for middle management to supervise their employees and hold them accountable.

For hiring a new employee, a company may create an orientation checklist to ensure proper documentation is secured for legal and logistical requirements such as W2s, payroll and signoff of an employee handbook explaining policies at a corporate level. Expanding that checklist to ensure that quality expectations are made clear could include: 1) a current job description, 2) training on relevant ISO related procedures for their job description, records and/or reporting requirements, 3) access to and training on necessary software programs with relevant permission levels, and 4) a 60 or 90 day evaluation to ensure knowledge acquired during the orientation was retained. Implementing some or all of these items will help existing and new employees understand their role in the quality management system and therefore be more accountable.

   B) *Ensuring that the quality policy and quality objectives are established for the quality management system and are compatible with the context and strategic direction of the organization. (Structural)*

Establishing a mission and vision drives the strategic direction of a company. The strategy must recognize major forces working for and against the company's agenda.[3] A vision without a strategy is just an illusion. It is important that the strategy drive the quality policy, and the quality policy sets the framework for establishing company goals, objectives, targets, and continual improvement toward realizing the strategy. The monitoring and measuring controls are the means by which the company knows if it is achieving its goals. Objectives and targets provide specific guidance to employees to move them in the direction the company would like to proceed. Without this guidance, employees can be left without a path laid out in front of them causing them to be less efficient both in their day to day and longer term tasking, as well as stray from the company's strategic goals. Without structure employees will invent ways to complete tasks rather than following established processes.

Imagine getting dropped off at the base of a mountain and being expected to climb towards the top without a trail to get started—reaching the top would pose quite a challenge. Policies and objectives provide the pathway employees can take to more easily meet the expectations of leadership. It also allows their managers to direct them back on to the path should they go astray. If the company is in an acquisition phase, they can use this strategy to identify objectives that are relevant to this strategic

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[2] Sarah Green Carmichael, "The Research is Clear: Long Hours Backfire for People and for Companies," *Harvard Business Review*, August 19, 2015.

[3] Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 180.

direction. One objective may be to ensure the acquired company is conformant to their quality management system within one year.

C) *Ensuring the integration of the quality management system requirements into the organization's business processes. (Structural)*

Creating a master list of company processes that document what a company is currently doing, then asking the process owners (employee(s) responsible for ensuring that procedures reflect practice and that personnel understand expectations) to take it one step further and write the procedures for each process, is a first step in meeting this requirement. The next step is conducting a documentation audit of those procedures to ensure the requirements of the standard are met. To complete this in an efficient manner without restructuring, it may make sense for the company to hire an ISO expert to conduct the documentation audit. An ISO expert can also assist with any needed adjustments to meet standard requirements without adding to the company's headcount.

Companies often have an informal system for managing compliments and/or complaints from a customer, but not necessarily for monitoring the customer's perceptions or tracking trends. An addition to an existing process might be to add a customer survey soliciting feedback or administer a log showing the results of contact with the customer to prove service expectations (whether positive or negative) are being looked at and analyzed for trends which drive continuous improvement.

D) *Promoting the use of the process approach and risk-based thinking. (Symbolic)*

One way to integrate the requirements is by organizing the quality management system with a process focus, rather than a standards focus. In a process based quality management system, the executive team identifies management as process owners. Process owners are those who are responsible for ensuring procedures, work instructions, standard operating procedures and forms are written to describe actual practice while meeting the needs of the international standard.

Procedures should reflect the major processes of the company and not be written just to meet the requirements of the standard. As described in the previous requirement but taking it to the next level, a company can start by creating a master list of the company's major business processes, such as human resources, information technology, contracts, suppliers and purchasing, production, operations, and maintenance, and identify a process owner for each of them to document how each process is performed. While the process owners are writing these procedures, they should keep in mind that the procedures may change over time. They should reflect how the process currently works, keeping in mind where the company wants them to be (based on the goals) in the future. Another consideration is how risk plays a role in the process.

Effectively incorporating risk-based thinking means taking those questions that are always left in the back of the mind, bringing them to the forefront, and documenting them in a process flow. Consider the hiring process as an example. Risk-based questions to ask when looking to hire may include whether the company has the resources in their budget to fund a new employee, what kind of confidential information will need to be disclosed, and whether the potential employee has the appropriate education and training to perform the work. A process approach gives the hiring group the tools to manage these risks, including preparing a business plan which sets the budget, providing a confidentiality agreement to new hires, and reviewing the employee application and other credentials during the interview process.

E) *Ensuring that the resources needed for the quality management system are available. (Human Resource)*

For small to mid-sized companies, especially those dependent on specific market sectors (the oil industry, for example), going lean is the new normal. Executives expect middle management and their employees to do more with less in the day to day activities while providing quality products and services. ISO9001:2015 seeks to change some of the drawbacks of going lean by putting a stronger emphasis on analyzing the resources needed to provide a quality product and/or service. These resources include infrastructure, operations, and the ability to adequately monitor and measure results. The ISO standard also requires consideration for the operational environment, including social, psychological, and physical factors.

When taking a hard look at the job description of an employee, it might become apparent that the employee is doing tasks beyond what is expected or sometimes less than is required. Allowing a flexible work schedule, shifting job responsibilities, cross-training, and ensuring an efficient and productive work ethic are just a few methods for ensuring adequate resource availability. If an employee is spending two to three hours a day commuting to the office, consider allowing them to work from home or a remote office a few days a week to devote more time to working on tasks and less time on driving. The employer promotes environmental stewardship and empowers the employee to become more self-motivated.

Developing a budget to include quality management system support within each department, ensuring personnel can adequately perform any additional duties related to the quality management system, and that the workplace is sound (i.e. non-confrontational, normal stress levels, ergonomic, etc.), are all vital to ensuring the success over the long haul.

F) *Communicating the importance of effective quality management and of conforming to the quality management system requirements. (Symbolic)*

When it comes to communication, some companies have a very active leadership team, providing needed resources and a solid support system for employees. In these companies, the lines of communication between top and middle management are excellent, and the importance of conformance gets passed on to all employees. In other companies where the leadership team is more reticent, communication often falls short. In the former case, the methods can be as active as one-on-one dialog with employees, where the latter can be as passive as the company's internet page.

When communication between executive and middle management breaks down, it can cause the executive team to become disengaged from the quality management system. For some companies, the only time the executive team gets involved in the quality management system is during the periodic management review, which may only occur once a year. The disrupted communication results in lack of engagement and conformance to the requirements of the management system, including goals, objectives, and targets. Communicating employee responsibilities for quality management throughout all levels of the company starts when the process owner is identified, when an employee is hired or when their position changes. Creating a master list of process owners' respective procedures, providing an overview of the quality management system, and drilling down to the responsibilities of the new hire to ensure adequate training occurs, and discussing changes in responsibilities due to a new position are all important for communicating requirements and ensuring conformance over time.

G) *Ensuring that the quality management system achieves its intended results. (Structural)*

The executive team provides direct input into identifying goals, objectives, and targets. Reviewing these periodically helps management ensure that intended results are achieved. Executives at some companies have more of a hands-off approach, allowing their managers to run the show. Another approach is to have the Quality Manager/Management Representative present the results which can cause tension between quality and other departments. In a well implemented management system, each process owner presents the results of their review to executive management. It keeps the audience more engaged by having a diverse set of speakers during the meeting and allows the executive team to ask any questions about successes and/or failures directly to the person responsible. If the goal of the supplier process is to conduct six on-site, high risk supplier audits per year and the process owner is not on track to meet the goal, executive management can, during a review, ask the person directly responsible about the plan to meet the goal and help provide any resources needed (approval of expenses, travel time, knowledgeable auditors, etc.) to accomplish the audits by the end of the year. This removes the Quality Manager/Management Representative as middle-man and drives change faster.

H) *Engaging, directing, and supporting persons to contribute to the effectiveness of the quality management system. (Human Resource)*

Taken by themselves, the verbs in this clause of the standard describing the role of company leaders can be taken at face value as descriptions of key actions they must undertake.

1) Engage – participate or become involved in.
2) Direct – control the operations of; manage or govern.
3) Support - give assistance to, especially financially; enable to function or act.
4) Contribute - help to cause or bring about.
5) Effectiveness - the degree to which something is successful in producing a desired result; success

Doing this basic exercise of breaking down the definitions of key words of the standard allows company leaders to better understand just how important their role is:

1) Participating or becoming involved in the management system.
2) Controlling the operations of the management system.
3) Giving assistance to employees implementing the management system to enable it to function or act.
4) (4&5) Helping to cause or bring about the degree to which something is successful in producing a desired result in the management system.

I) *Promoting improvement. (Political)*

There is a difference between adding a statement reflecting continual improvement in the quality policy and promoting it throughout the organization. Opportunities for improvement should be solicited during annual internal audits, employee evaluations, management review meetings, and in day to day interactions with employees. Findings can be documented either in a simple log or software program. Once documented, opportunities for improvement will not simply die on the tip of the tongue of the

person saying it, but are sustained with qualified personnel reviewing the ideas for consideration. Continual improvement items may be rejected and closed out, kept open and deferred, or acted upon, but they should not get lost.

J) *Supporting other relevant management roles to demonstrate their leadership as it applies to their areas of responsibility. (Political)*

Depending on the size of the company, process owners can identify user representatives who might be responsible for ensuring other employees who touch the process in some way understand and perform their duties according to the established procedures. If these managers are not comfortable interpreting the elements of the ISO standard, they could hire a contractor to guide them through the implementation process, provide training on internal audits, feedback on corrective action, and guidance on passing the certification audit.

Members of the executive team can demonstrate leadership by creating opportunities to talk to employees at all levels of the company. Improvement of the quality management system for their process area should be in the forefront of their dialogue. Executive management could make it a goal to talk to employees at least once a month about the importance of the company's goals, their role in achieving them, continual improvement, and any elements of risk they see from a new or changed process

Responsibility for implementation, training, internal auditing, corrective action, and continual improvement of each process generally lies with middle management as the process owner, but leadership and direction from executives is paramount to the success of a solid quality management system. If there is a strong leadership at the highest level, in all four frameworks, employees will buy in to the system. Employees at every level are instrumental to the success of the quality management system, even if commitment to certification starts at the top.

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