

Revised ISO 9001 promotes communication – ‘the vital catalyst in an organization’

by Erika Leonardi

In brief

Communication, both internal, and external with the customer, is a requirement of the revised ISO 9001:2000, defined in clauses 5.5.3 Internal communication, and 7.2.3. Customer communication. In the first of two articles on the subject, Italian management consultant Erika Leonardi reviews the internal communication component as the “essential element” in creating the vital dialogue between the various levels and functions of an organization, which she likens to a living organism dependent on the interaction of each part to sustain life.

She welcomes the fact that communication and the whole dimension of company management is now much more prominent in the new version of ISO 9001. It lays down the requirement to circulate adequate flows of information throughout the organization, with employees seeing their roles anew as customers and suppliers responsible for output and input, as essential parts of the communication process.

Dr. Leonardi recommends that organizations should restructure all those channels of communication that allow its different units to “speak” to each other, such as telephones, notice boards, newsletters, intranet and meetings, and define the personnel involved as an integral part of the process. She concludes that good communication is the “vital catalyst” that will enhance the quality management system, and, above all, the well being of everybody in the organization. It also paves the way to better external communication with the customer.

The author’s article is based on the Final Draft International Standard (FDIS) version of ISO 9001:2000. At the FDIS stage of development, the ISO members are asked to vote for or against with no further substantive modification of the texts so, barring minor editorial changes, the FDIS versions will closely resemble the final documents.



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The introduction of these new requirements is clear recognition of the vital role of communication in the management of an organization

For the first time, the importance of communication is now made explicit in the ISO 9000 standards, as is evident from ISO/FDIS 9001:2000 – a development I very much welcome (Fig. 1, following page). Communication requirements appear in two sections: **5. Management Responsibility** and **7. Product Realization**.

The introduction of these new requirements is clear recognition of the vital role of communication in the management of an organization. Indeed, the whole dimension of company management

and its role and commitment is much more prominent in the new ISO 9000 versions, and the points of contact with Total Quality Management are now quite extensive. And it is not by chance that the requirement for internal communication is introduced in the section devoted to Management Responsibility.

This article, the first of two on the new ISO 9000 communication requirements, will focus on clause 5.5.3 Internal communication in some depth.

5.5.3 Internal communication.

Top management shall ensure that appropriate communication channels are established within the organization and that communication takes place regarding the

effectiveness of the quality management system.

Underlying the importance of communication is the logic behind the process. Although this aspect is not new to ISO 9000, the introduction of the concept of a communication process, in the full sense of the term, in an organization is a significant evolution. In fact, to introduce the concept of a process will imply for many organizations a transition from a functional organizational model to a process model. This is not always easy, because it demands a different approach to performing one’s role.

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The logic of the process “imposes” the need to circulate information, so that the different work units are harmonized. And here, 5.5.3 Internal communication, a subclause of 5.5. Responsibility, authority and communication, clearly requires that the different organizational levels and job functions are supplied with an adequate flow of communication, not only concerning the processes linked to the quality management system (QMS), but also relative to their efficiency.

Its message is clear – communication between such areas must guarantee not only that each process (commercial, design, purchas-

ing and acting. The underlying guiding thought will be: “The output of my process has value only to the extent that a colleague-customer exists who can use it for his or her activity; and at the same time, I appreciate my colleague-supplier for generating my input”. If we accept this logic, the importance of the communication component becomes immediately apparent, and it is through

The organization as an organism

To apply the revised ISO 9001 effectively, look at the organization as if it were an organism (Fig. 3), highlighting the fact that it is a combination of different parts that can only give the best of themselves if they are able to establish contact and interact by “creating a dialogue”. In a living

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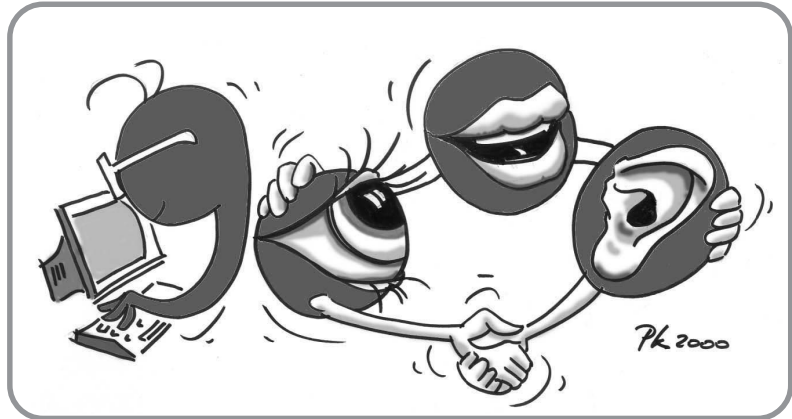


Fig. 1: For the first time, the importance of communication is now made explicit in the ISO 9000 standards

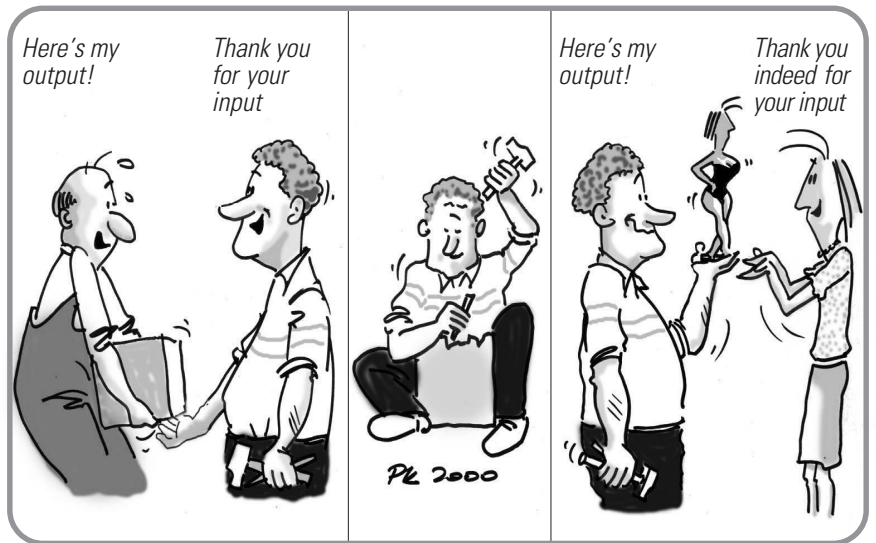


Fig. 2: Every employee is a ‘customer’ and ‘supplier’ of internal services to colleagues.

ing, etc.) produces the defined output, but also that it takes place from the point of view of effectiveness. Effective communication can forestall potential negative events – e.g. unnecessary repetition of an activity, constant “firefighting”, an incomplete reply to the customer, etc.

Employees as ‘customers’ and ‘suppliers’

The advantage of looking at the process anew is that every function performs its role from a different viewpoint – not in isolation, but instead as “customer” and “supplier”, in addition to job functions (Fig.2). Seeing organizational roles from this perspective promotes a different way of exist-

communication that the different contributions become clear.

However, in any organization, communication is not linked solely to the process of management. In order for people to perform their roles in a correct and understanding manner (6.2.2. Competence, awareness and training) attention must be given to other aspects that have not been relevant to the quality management system until now. To ensure effective communication at all levels, the first step is to define the channels and personnel involved.

organism, the different parts (nervous system, skeleton, muscles, etc.) must maintain contact to perform their roles correctly. None can sustain life separately. The analogy with an organization is obvious: the different units can only perform optimally if they communicate continually with each other.

Communication is the essential element. If design does not exchange information with production, purchasing and technical assistance, how can its output be effective? And if the administration does not exchange infor-

mation with the commercial department and purchasing, how can it, too, be effective?

It is not by chance that the requirement for internal communication is introduced in the section dedicated to management responsibility

Orderly communication, not chaos!

Another key aspect of communication is linked to personnel – the primary resource of any organization and an important focus of ISO/FDIS 9001:2000. While the 1994 version covered personnel responsibility and training in general, the new version focuses on the subject in greater detail (see clause 6.2 Human resources). The message is that personnel should see themselves as an integral part of the organization, and that communication should be cultivated as the vital catalyst.

In that endeavour, we should restructure all those channels of communication that allow the different components of the organization to “speak” to each other, and that allow people to feel part of the organization (Fig.4.). Means of communication that promote the circulation of information between personnel must be defined. For example:

- telephones
- notice boards
- newsletters
- internal rules
- memoranda
- intranet
- meetings
- conventions.

Each must be defined with the necessary procedures and responsibilities. For example, what is the purpose of the notice board? what types of message should be posted on it? who can contribute? who is responsible for updating it? and so on.

Internal communication is a process that sustains all the activities of the organization. Before defining procedures or management instructions for each means of communication, it is a good idea to conduct an internal questionnaire to measure current levels of information management, and to ascertain communication needs and expectations. This can provide the starting point to defining and formalizing the QMS from the viewpoint of the internal customer, and to fulfilling two of the quality principles on which the ISO 9000 revisions are based:

- the involvement of people.
- a factual approach to decision making.

By this means, it will be possible to measure the result of introducing and managing the instruments of communication. And in doing this we will have also applied another principle:

- continual improvement.

However, one should always be aware of some basic principles of communication:

- clarity of objectives: do we want to inform, convince, involve, ask for support or opinions, provoke reactions?

The introduction of the concept of a communication process, in the full sense of the term, in an organization, is a significant evolution

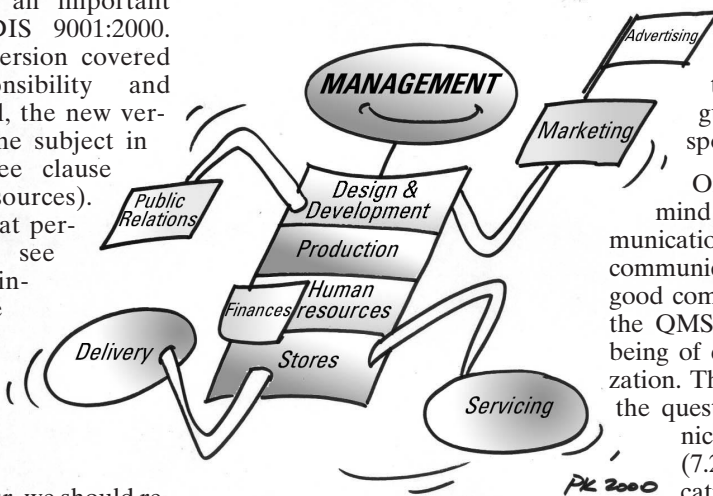


Fig. 3: A company organization is like a living organism

- focus on the receiver: who it is, adjust to their language, give guidance on what response is being sought.

One should always keep in mind these two aspects of communication to avoid unsuccessful communication. The benefits of good communication will enhance the QMS, and above all the well being of everybody in the organization. The next step is to address the question of external communication with the customer (7.2.3. Customer communication), the subject of a following article. Q



Fig. 4: If the key instruments of internal communication – telephones, notice boards, newsletters, etc. – are not managed effectively, chaos will rule!