

## conference preview

# HOW DO I ENCOURAGE QUALITY AS MANAGEMENT?

BY CHRIS CROSBY, PE

**REGARDLESS OF THE TYPE OF BUSINESS** you manage—steel fabrication, erection, design, detailing, etc.—your customers expect a quality product.

We all know that when we deliver the correct product on time and within budget, our customers are pleased—and that by doing so, we are building a foundation for repeat business. Of course, there is an opposite side to this coin: Poor quality can quickly cause this foundation to crumble.

We also know that our companies will experience quality issues from time to time. We, as management, need to be in tune with these issues and understand their nature—e.g., are they unique or are they systemic? Systemic issues may point to a larger problem lurking below the surface. It could be a disconnect with the quality management system or an implementation shortcoming or shift in the culture. Staying on top of the individual issues so they don't blossom into a systemic issue is vital to building a thriving quality culture within the organization.

Any real change to an organization's culture takes time and effort. This is a process, not a one-time event, and it must be managed. As managers, we are always looking for ways to accelerate processes, and change management is no different. Shortcutting the process of cultural change will produce, at best, lukewarm results. Let's take a look at how to orchestrate a positive cultural shift through encouragement.

**Commitment.** This is required from the highest level of management through each level down to the front-line supervisors. They all have to walk the talk. They all have to emphasize the importance of a quality product all the time. This effort will not only give your message credibility but

The quality mindset starts at the top.

will also show consistency in the message. As the message of quality is reinforced through each level of management, the employees will start to understand that quality decisions are not situational. As a manager, when I see or hear about a quality issue, I have a one-on-one discussion with the area supervisor and/or foreman to understand the issue and also to dig deeper into what message they are sending to their employees. Was this issue just an outlying data point or something deeper? Is our message as a management team consistent across all levels?

**Communication.** Direct, clear, concise communication is a must. Managers must define what is required in terms of quality to the point that there are no questions about the expected quality of the finished product. I have read too many quality management system documents—i.e., quality manuals, procedures, work instructions, etc.—that are picturesque, with prose worthy of a spot on the best-sellers list—but when it comes to clarity, they fall flat.

But communication does not just stop at clearly defining goals and expectations; it needs to be a two-way street. Management needs to set the goals and expectations but also must listen to feedback from their employees. This feedback is key to your root-cause analysis and process improvement.

Providing regular feedback with both positive and course correction to all employees is another key component to communication. All too often we fall into the routine of providing course correction but neglect to also provide positive reinforcement for the desired behaviors. It is also important for employees to know that management sees the positive contributions that they are making to the organization. Direct recognition or pep talks from their front-line supervisors and formal recognition during quality meetings will reinforce the organization's commitment to a quality culture. And remember that the feedback must be timely, specific and sincere.

**Measurements.** "What gets measured gets improved." That direct quote from a mentor of mine has proven true time and again. Tracking mistakes takes effort, but how do we know we are improving if we don't know where we started and where we are currently? The improvements we make to our systems should be driven by the data we are collecting. The measurements we are gathering need to be hand in glove with the customer's requirements that we have set forth and established as



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our expected level of quality with our team. In other words, we need to be measuring what's important to the customer.

Once you have some data, you'll want to review this information and determine the appropriate course of action. If you subscribe to the Deming cycle (plan, do, check, act), measurements are the "checking" part of this cycle and are necessary for taking the next step of acting on the gathered information as appropriate.

**Employee involvement.** Managers should meet with employees regularly to discuss large-scale strategies, review the data that has been gathered, discuss small changes to the processes and talk about both successes and failures. Keep in mind that when discussing failures, some employees will become defensive and cast blame, which will be counterproductive to the analysis. Instead, keep the focus of the meeting on the process and not the person. When a specific employee does need to be singled out for a course correction, that discussion should be handled one-on-one and not in a public forum.

Along with regularly scheduled meetings, another tool I have used for employee involvement is a lessons-learned report—particularly during challenging projects. Our front-line supervisors will discuss with their team what went right, what could have gone better and what will be done differently next time. They, in turn, will work with a manager to draft a report (the formality of the report is inconsequential; it's the process of gathering the information for the report that's critical). Once the report is finished, we all sit down together and learn from this project.

I have used this tool not only for quality but also for safety and productivity. It gives everyone on the team a chance to provide critical input, and it also demonstrates their importance to the team.

**Training.** Training is the foundation of a successful quality management system. The training program needs to clearly define the organization's commitment to building a culture of quality. As with most efforts, it should have the message of quality interwoven throughout. Follow-up training is always recommended for both new and current employees to continually reinforce the message of quality. From there, you can develop additional training programs from the data gathered during your measurements, as you see trends develop. These additional training programs should prescriptively address areas of concern and, again, reinforce the message of quality.

Encouraging employees to produce a quality product will build a culture of quality, and the time it takes is worth the investment. Having a clear commitment to quality, open lines of communication, data to direct changes and well-trained, involved employees will aid in this process. Managers have to be intentional about improving the organization, and they should be intentional about building a quality culture and not simply controlling quality. ■

*This article is a preview of Session Q4 "How do I Encourage Quality as Management?" at NASCC: The Steel Conference, taking place March 22–24 in San Antonio. Learn more about the conference at [www.aisc.org/nascc](http://www.aisc.org/nascc).*