Post12 – Quality for Most of Us

This is a 4-minute read that encourages backsliding firms to finally fix their management of quality; no matter what your intent for quality is, without a Basic QMS your success will be random.

Quality is a tough subject, but the really tough part was figuring out what it is. With that decided, implementing a system is actually fairly simple, though unfortunately the prevalence of ISO9000 and its mandatory "QMS" makes implementation look hard and expensive. It need not be so. In a previous post (*Project Prospects: Put quality in its place*) I have given my ten cents worth on what I believe honest-to-goodness project quality really is, and that specification (or your preferred alternative) forms the prerequisite for today's topic. Regardless of your own views on the definition of project quality, this post sets out the minimum you and your organization must do to ensure projects are in fact following your prescription.

What is a QMS?

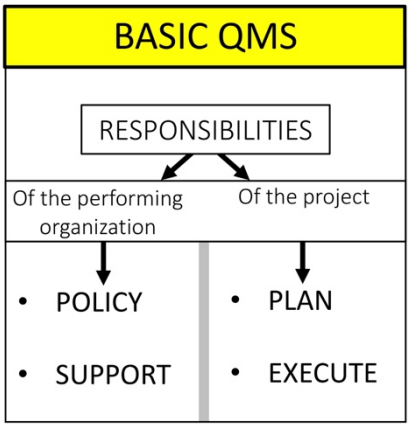
QMS stands for Quality Management System and comprises the management (not technical) environment in which your project exists. It's a fairly common industry term and has been around for decades, but in my observation only meaningfully exists in a minority of organizations.

The critical issue is that a QMS must be implemented by the organization (commercial services firm, or internal company department) not the project. It is unlikely to succeed as a purely project initiative because, as any plumber will tell you, quality must flow top-down. If you are wondering whether you need this, think about how you would currently answer a client's reasonable question; "how do you manage quality on your projects?" Rather than mumbling about quality being job one, and that it is everyone's responsibility, wouldn't it be smarter to say "we use a QMS"?

So, if you are a project manager (PM), pass this article to your department head.

Introducing a Basic QMS

In thinking about how to model the postulated minimum for quality management, I felt like dropping the title QMS to remove the connotations of complexity and cost. But, because I am actually describing a version of a QMS and the term is generally recognizable, I have simply dubbed it a Basic QMS (BQMS).



The components I am going to describe should all be prefaced by 'quality'; please make that qualification if the descriptor is omitted in the cause of brevity.

The system has to start with Responsibilities. And who says "it's time to define our responsibilities for quality?" Maybe your boss needs to pass this article to her boss! That done, we are now on two paths. First, the performing organization must prepare a document that clearly states conditions for quality at the policy level, and then provide an appropriate level of support for projects during planning and execution. And secondly, the project is then obligated to prepare a Quality Plan as per Policy, and to ensure that it is followed during project execution.

Responsibilities for Quality

At the peak of the quality movement in the late nineties most gurus gave us the platitude that 'everyone' was responsible for quality. And it worked, because that that was the answer most given when I asked the question during my teaching days! But as experienced team players have learned, when everyone is responsible, no one is responsible. The person responsible is, of course, the PM, who should then spell out the specific quality expectations for each team member. Thus, everyone is responsible, but in very specific terms and can be held accountable.

The performing organization's responsibility, above Policy and Support, is to commit to the BQMS. It's as simple as that. All project quotes must propose and include BQMS activities, project costs, and the client's expected role. If the client's requirements go beyond the BQMS, then naturally they must be addressed by the proposal and priced accordingly.

A Quality Policy

This is prepared, endorsed, and distributed by executive. It goes beyond the simple statement of commitment, and therefore lays out in a few paragraphs what that commitment entails. Every employee should see the impact upon themselves in the policy.

An ideal model for policy is the Quality Triangle - people, process, and technology, one paragraph for each. In *Commercial Project Management* I expand on this concept with some specific examples.

Support for Quality

Preparing and agreeing policy is cheap – implementation is where the costs lie. Support is the bulk of the firm's cost, because project costs are borne by the client. And this is where care and thought are needed. If the firm is small and impecunious, Support commitments must be modest (but NOT non-existent). For example, provision of templates, standardized testing environments, and a basic one-day training course. Larger firms may commit to a senior and independent quality management group within the firm that executes a quality support mandate for all projects in liaison with the PMs.

The Quality Plan

Prepared by the PM, the Quality Plan is another flexible document ranging from a page or so within the overall project plan, to a weighty independent report. The purpose is to describe how the project will achieve the agreed quality objectives, and might therefore present standards, techniques, responsibilities, metrics and more. Traditional QC/QA commitments also belong here and overall the content should be compliant with policy. PMBOK® and many other texts provide additional guidance, and *Commercial Project Management* presents my own recipe for either a full quality report, or a quicker, efficient Q&A-style template.

Execute for Quality

Fundamentally the project executes under the mandate of the project plan, delivering the quality requirements specified in the Quality Plan. Though checklists have an important role, there is no silver bullet for this component – just persistent observation, praise, and corrections as needed from the hand of the PM. Larger projects may, according to Policy, warrant external quality audits, usually provided as part of the firm's Support commitment.

The Takeaway

Formalized QMS has been characterized as expensive and 'over-kill', mainly through its association with costly quality implementations such as ISO9000, Capability Maturity Models, TQM, or Six Sigma. This is wrong. Rather than just dismissing the matter, performing organizations are better advised to adopt an inexpensive fit-for-purpose BQMS.

A BQMS is simple – develop a policy, define responsibilities for quality, build a support function, create project plans that include quality, and execute accordingly.

If you don't do this, any quality in your projects happens by luck, and wasn't in the plan!

Robin Hornby

Robin's new book Commercial Project Management – A Guide for Selling and Delivering Professional Services published by Routledge is a complete exposé for the commercial environment. The complementary 2-day seminar, delivered in Robin's enthusiastic style, is packed with insider tips, techniques, and (mainly) true cautionary tales. Contact Robin at tmi@telus.net. A pdf download of this article can be found at www.tmipm.com

https://www.routledge.com/Commercial-Project-Management-A-Guide-for-Selling-and-Delivering-Professional/Hornby/p/book/9781138237681