ISO 9002 Revisited

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It seems more than 4 years since the Hahndorf conference where David Cliff and Michael Cole spoke on Quality Assurance (QA). After hearing them speak, we decided that QA was for our business. Before I can go into what ISO 9002 has done for Larkman Nurseries I must go over some basic issues.

Over the centuries many great minds have written on the subject of "quality". Robert Pirsig in his book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, devotes many a page trying to define the intrinsic characteristics of quality, without real success. It is amazing that with the amount of usage the word receives, very few people can give a good definition of what it is. Yet we use it when describing food, accommodation, entertainment, clothing, art, and just about anything else we are likely to spend money on. The advertisers would have us believe that everything their client sells is "top quality" and everyone else's is poor quality.

When you add this conundrum to the fact that what is quality for one person is not quality for the next, you have a real commercial problem. Our customers all want quality products but are unable to define what that means. Indeed quality is so subjective that it is the perception that really matters and not the reality.

The essence of a successful business is one that can provide the quality that each of its customer's desires. A business that has managed to determine what it is that each customer wants prior to production and is then able to ensure that what is delivered is slightly ahead of what is expected will not only succeed but will stand out from its competitors.

It is imperative that we determine what we are talking about when we discuss quality. We would all agree that a *Buxus sempervirens* that is 45 cm tall and 20 cm wide with dark green foliage in a 15-cm pot is a quality plant. We may also say that a *Buxus* that is 20 cm tall and 10 cm wide also in a 15-cm pot is poor quality. What would we say if the customer had ordered plants for a hedge and one supplier delivered 50 that were all 20 cm tall and 10 cm wide whilst the other delivered 50 that varied between 25 cm and 55 cm tall and varied between 15 cm and 30 cm wide? The latter plants may as individual plants be better quality but as a group are lesser quality (in the customer's opinion).

This is the crux of quality assurance. Delivering what is appropriate to the customer's needs. ISO9002 does not affect the quality of the product. It does not mean that our plants are better than our competitors (although this is usually the case). It means, first of all, that the system we use to produce and despatch our plants works the same each and every time. In other words, whomever is doing a task knows what has to be done and to what level. Secondly, it also means that our customers can feel confident that we understand what it is that they want/need, and that we are capable of delivering it.

To deliver exactly what is specified requires a set procedure for each step in the production line. Each procedure also has a set of prescriptive work instructions with a corresponding set of records to enable management to monitor the production. These records are important in two ways. By filling out the record the employee is making a greater level of personal commitment to the task. As they complete the

record they are committing to writing their statement that they have done what they are supposed to have done. The record also allows the management team to satisfy themselves that the procedures are being completed properly.

I have heard many people refer to ISO as a paper burden. Although being ISO certified does require that you have a comprehensive paper trail, I feel that this description devalues the benefits of an ISO-certified system. Sure there is a lot of paper generated in operating the system, but the trail is more than just paper. For each piece of paper there is a series of procedures and work instructions that have to be followed to generate it. This paper trail allows the manager, or owner, to follow an order right through from tender to payment of invoice.

In most businesses there are numerous steps between order acceptance and payment. Some of these are critical and some are not. They are all necessary (if not they should be removed) and usually the completion of each step is a prerequisite for the next step.

Once this concept is accepted then it is not hard to understand the concept of internal customers. This is often a serious "phase change" for many companies as it engenders an acceptance of the requirement for every member of staff to produce to the same level of quality and perfection. For too many years it has only been the sales or despatch departments that have been concerned with what the end product looks like. Once internal customers are recognised, the performance of the whole company will improve as each person will have to face up to the responsibility of what they do.

In a properly running ISO system people understand the interdependence of what they do and what their workmates are doing. They will pass criticism on what the person prior to them has done. This criticism will be both positive and negative and will be generated with the aim of improving the productivity of the whole. It will not be used for personal grandstanding nor exacting retribution for past wrongs.

An ISO system generates forms called non-conformances which some companies call Opportunities for Improvement. These are produced when a member of the team does not follow the required procedures and the aim of them is to improve the end product. Sometimes a non-conformance is just a matter of reminding a member of the team that there is a procedure and that it should be followed. Other times a non-conformance will highlight a shortcoming in the system. Either way they can be generated by any member of the team on the actions of any other member, including management.

It would be a rare operating system that does not generate non-conformances as it is through these forms that a good quality assurance system is able to grow and improve. They enable the staff to demonstrate whether they need improvement or whether the system needs adjustment. A good ISO system also empowers the staff to develop their own work places by allowing them to set their own parameters within the defined requirements of the production system. It also means that new staff have prescribed guidelines which are known to work. Guidelines that are simple and easy to read yet comprehensive enough to ensure correct training.

With all ISO systems there should be a Quality Assurance (QA) manual. This manual will vary in size depending on the level of prescription that each company has. For example, if the company is basically a creative or design-based business there will be few prescriptive procedures and work instruc-

tions, and the manual will be quite small. Whereas, if the company is production based and has a high number of detailed procedures and work instructions, then the manual will be quite large.

As we are a "production line" with a large number of regimented production methods we have a large and comprehensive QA manual. Through the development of this manual we have defined and refined our work practices and production methodologies. Inside the manual is our quality policy which defines our approach to the ongoing quality assurance system. We detail all the positions within the company and how they relate to the others thereby clearly outlining the lines of responsibility. Also within the manual is enough information and procedures/work instructions to enable the duties and tasks of all the positions to be clearly and comprehensively understood. By extracting the relevant policies, procedures, and work instructions a work manual can be compiled for each member of staff.

Over the past 4 years much of the extensive marketing and development work that we have done has started to pay off. We have gone through a rapid and prolonged growth phase which could have put great strain on the company if it wasn't for our ISO system

If a small company is to reap maximum benefit from a growth phase it must have, and utilise, efficient operating systems. A good QA management system will allow for rapid expansion. This is due to the fact that it must undergo regular review by all members of the staff. Also, by its very nature, ISO9002 brings about improvements as the inadequacies occur. As a shortfall comes about, non-conformances will be issued. These non-conformances will show that the staff have followed procedures but problems have still occurred which indicates that the system is failing and that improvements need to be undertaken.

A company with a culture of QA, with an understanding of the importance of procedures and systems, is best placed to develop a safe and efficient workplace. One of the issues facing modern business operators is that of legal "backside protection". In areas such as occupational health and safety, industrial relations, and insurance, the ability to ensure that all staff perform to a set standard and to then be able to prove it many years later will be a must in the next century.

Using our QA system we have developed a set of procedures for the use and application of chemicals. These procedures cover storage, mixing, and use of the pesticides. It also covers what records need to be completed and filed to satisfy all legal, occupational health and safety, and industrial requirements. Granted the procedures do not guarantee full compliance but the culture of a QA enterprise makes it more likely. The records generated can be kept for as long as required to demonstrate staff compliance.

The main purpose of a QA system is to satisfy the needs of the customer. To enable them to buy with confidence. This is not so critical when they are able to personally select their products, but are of major importance when they are purchasing over the phone, fax, or (heaven forbid) the internet. When ordering in these ways the customer must feel confident that they will get want they want. A money-back guarantee is not sufficient as there are out-of-pocket freight expenses, loss of income from preplanned sales, and staff costs that still have to be accounted for. In other words getting their money back, is just not enough.

Being ISO 9002 certified enables a producer to advertise confidence in purchase. It enables the company to advertise to a remote client base, thereby

allowing them to compete in new markets. At the same time giving them a marketing advantage over their competitors in the local markets. A company undertaking a marketing campaign of professionalism and reliability would reap great rewards from ISO 9002 certification.

As discussed above, ISO doesn't guarantee what level of quality a company produces. Quality assurance is about the procedures; industry-based accreditation or endorsement systems are about business infrastructure. In the nursery industry this is called the Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme of Australia (NIASA). With NIASA a nursery has plant, equipment, and facilities that are equal to or above professional best practice; therefore, it is most likely to produce healthy, hygienic well grown plants.

When a company has both ISO and industry endorsement it could be said that they have a Total Quality Management System. A customer would expect to receive product that meets industry benchmarks and is delivered to meet their expectations. These two marks of professionalism should be the aim of every business.

In summary, ISO 9002 is not an end but a means to an end, a tool that enables a company to achieve its full potential. Our ISO system has allowed us to grow without losing touch with our customers and staff. It has helped us develop a culture of quality and professionalism. The benefits we have gained from our certification are far greater than what it has cost us.

I would commend both the process and the certification to any company, large or small, for whom high profits through full customer satisfaction are their ultimate aim.