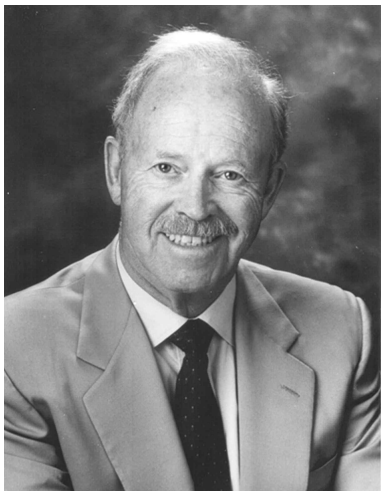
What is ISO for?

Philip B. CROSBY



When I was a quality engineer back in the good old days we would go check out potential suppliers. Using a list of questions and requirements developed for and by Defense Department contractors, we would evaluate the company's probability of delivering to us what we were going to order. Of course if what they made were a catalog item or considered to be a commodity we didn't go visit them at all. The results of these visits were then shared with the Purchasing Department who considered them carefully and then usually placed the order based on price.

Today the emphasis is based on what is called „third party" verification. When a company goes through the process of being certified, or registered, as complying with ISO 9000 or other variations of ISO standards then they are considered to be acceptable. Purchasing can then feel free to go ahead and place the order based on price. If being certified to an ISO package is all that it takes to make a company acceptable from a quality standpoint then when everyone is certified there will be no difference.

Of course the real test of worth is whether the product or service being produced does in fact meet all the requirements of the purchase agreement. Corporations do like to do business with suppliers who have a success track along that line. They want suppliers who are considered to be reliable. For this reason most of them keep a formal or informal record that classifies their suppliers in accordance with results.

All of this could lead one to believe that thinking an ISO certification automatically brings business might not be a valid concept. After all it does not pretend to be program for quality improvement or management, only of documentation.

So what is ISO for? What does it accomplish for the company or for the quality professional who is administering it? What do they receive for all that money, attention, and involvement? Is it worth it? Does it advance his or her career? Does it make the stock of the company more valuable? There are some clear advantages:

First of all the certification is a ticket that gets the company on the list of those who have been willing to comply with the collection of Quality Assurance materials put together by the International Standards Organization.

Second it provides the Quality Professional with the opportunity to use the results of the certification pro-cess as a lever to supply the quality education program that will let the organization progress toward becoming known as reliable. That is a recognition that actually brings business to the company.

Third the collection of procedures does supply some authority for getting people to actually follow some of the more useful ones that can be inserted into the package.

There are also some disadvantages like management feeling that ISO is all it takes to have a proper quality system. Also I worry about the move to Internet buying (B to B) and what is going to happen to Quality in that case. The system is based on this „third party verification". Will suppliers be deemed qualified because they are on the list? Will they be asked to show that they actually are useful and reliable, or only document that some paid auditor thinks they are. Commodity items will fare well but specialty things may be suspect.

One of these days the quality of a supplier's output will be listed like their credit rating. This evaluation will be based on conformance to requirements results as recorded by their customers, not just compliance to a set of procedures.

My experience is that organizations who want to truly achieve the results that get them the reputation for being reliable have to have a clear policy on quality; have to educate everyone about their personal responsibility to create a culture of prevention; have clear requirements about the product and systems (ISO is useful here); and management has to insist, by example and direction, that everyone work this way.