The Road to Developing an Effective Quality Management System (QMS): Part 3 – Finish What You Started

By Tracy Barnhart, Quality Manager
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Let's Recap

Before we end this journey, let's go over the road we've traveled thus far. In Part 1, you learned what a QMS is and some of the many benefits of having an effective QMS. I also discussed developing a quality policy statement and goals, and how a quality manual is the handbook to a QMS. In Part 2, I taught you how to get started with developing your QMS documentation, and you learned some tips to help ensure your documentation is effective. Now it's time to head for the finish line! Along the way, I will be taking some U-turns to elaborate on a few things previously mentioned in my series, such as maintaining your QMS, getting buy-in from others, and document control.

How AASHTO re:source Went From Covered Wagon...   ...to Sports Car!

Before I go any further, let me begin by sharing how we at AASHTO re:source have benefited from developing our own QMS. Like most organizations, we haven't always had a formal QMS in place. Believe it or not, we had to start from scratch too! Sure, we've always maintained important records like customer requests and on-site assessment reports. But twenty-five years ago, many of our policies and procedures were not formally documented. This led to some miscommunication and inconsistencies among employees because we relied too much on our memories. Every time we trained a new person, it was like reinventing the wheel because we didn't have documented training guidelines. Time and resources were wasted trying to remember what we had done last time, and it was a struggle to maintain consistency.

We got on the QMS bandwagon gradually over the years. We learned that properly documenting what we do leads to better time management and use of resources. New assessors coming on board? No sweat! Everything is written down in detail, from the recruiting and hiring process through the extensive training program. Everyone knows exactly what their role is in these processes, and how to perform and document their activities. This is particularly beneficial when key employees are out of the office – someone else can easily step in and take the wheel by following the specific guidelines we established. There is no guesswork involved. We are driving in style now!

The Finish Line Is In Sight!

At this point, let's assume your QMS is fully documented. Key processes and anything else required by applicable QMS standards are adequately described. But is "adequate" good enough? Maybe it is. But maybe it isn't. Keep in mind that your QMS should help you continually improve the effectiveness and efficiency of your organization's performance. Having a bunch of meaningless words on paper just to fulfill documentation requirements probably isn't going to boost performance. Make your documentation count! Here are some tips on how to do that:

- Expand on the important details, if necessary. Are your words too vague? Do they make sense? Better yet…

- Cross-check what is written as you actually perform a specific QMS task – are all the steps included from start to finish?

- Ask yourself if someone unfamiliar with the task, like an auditor, can get a good understanding of the process solely by reading the information. If not, make adjustments.

Good to go? Great! Now it's time to begin the maintenance phase…

Wait…What? MAINTENANCE?! I Thought I Was Done!

The QMS is a "living" system. If you want it to be valuable to your organization, your QMS must be periodically reviewed and updated. You wouldn't drive your car for 5 years without ever changing the oil or rotating the tires, right? Well, why would you want to always use the same old QMS without ever checking it to make sure the information is current and

accurate? Remember, the QMS helps your organization achieve its goals. How can you ensure customer satisfaction if your QMS information is outdated and inaccurate?

In Part 1, I discussed the three basic components of maintaining an effective QMS: 1) Say what you do, 2) Do what you say, and 3) Prove it. In other words, if you say you calibrate thermometers every 6 months, make sure you are actually doing that and that you have records to prove it. Maintaining your QMS can be a daunting task, but it is very important to ensure that your documentation accurately reflects your laboratory's activities. Otherwise, what's the point of having a QMS in the first place? As you know, a lot can change in just a year or two. The documents you created two years ago were probably perfectly fine at the time, but now you may be doing those things quite differently.

It is a good idea to check your road map (i.e. the QMS) regularly. Remember how I suggested getting buy-in from others in your organization when developing your QMS (in Part 2)? That concept can also ease the pain of maintaining your QMS. For example, I have a regular review process in place at AASHTO re:source for all of our QMS documentation. At least once a year, I circulate each document to the personnel that are directly involved in that particular process. Each person reviews their part in the process, notes any changes or comments, and forwards the document to the next person on the list. The last person to review the document is the process owner, the person who has ultimate responsibility for the performance of a process. The process owner approves the changes and I update the "road map."

Don't forget about your record-keeping. Maintenance is just as important here, since records prove that you are properly documenting QMS activities. Implementing regularly-scheduled quality activities such as internal audits and management reviews is an excellent way to ensure that your records are complete and up-to-date. These activities will prompt you to review records that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Lastly, be mindful of document control during the maintenance phase of your QMS. How do you know when changes are made, and how do the users know they have the most current version of a document? AASHTO re:source's QMS is only available electronically to employees through our website, so only the most current version of each document is accessible. Also, each of our documents includes a revision date for extra document control assurance. The revision date allows us to easily track the last time changes were made, and instantly shows us if an outdated document is still in use.

Win the Race!
The ultimate rewards on this QMS journey are continual improvement and increased customer satisfaction. As a service organization, AASHTO re:source is very focused on the needs of our customers. Having clearly defined, continually maintained processes in place has greatly improved our efficiency and consistency. The end result has helped us achieve our most important objective of all - complete customer satisfaction. (And we can prove it!) Why not see what an effective QMS can do for you?