

Quality at its Core

Tools to keep businesses organized, on track work at home, too

By Lance Coleman

A wise person once told me that as we grow older, we grow more like ourselves. After leaving the manufacturing sector for 10 years and then returning, I found that quality still encompassed what drew me to the profession in the first place. Those values include doing it right the first time, doing what you say you will do, planning for the future, keeping good records and following ASQ's code of ethics.

These values form a bedrock upon which to build a foundation, whether professional or personal. Quality has carried me through my professional life as well as my personal life in ways I never realized were possible.

Getting started

When I left college with a degree in electrical engineering technology, I first worked in my company's engineering department, where I built and troubleshot prototypes. I later looked forward to a career in engineering design and development.

My dabbling in quality started out simply enough with a contract position as a receiving inspector for circuit boards and circuit board assemblies. The employer wanted someone with an electronics background who could learn inspection techniques.

My newfound inspection skills combined with my electronics background and analytical ability led to my next contract assignment as an internal quality assurance auditor. Having always been a reader, I began studying the works of W. Edwards Deming, Joseph M. Juran and Philip B. Crosby, and applying their principles, when possible, to my day-to-day activities.

Soon, through a combination of experience, education and self study, I made it into quality engineering and then quality management. I went into quality because I wanted to have a bigger view of how things worked in the company and be able to interact with more people.

After 10 years in the Department of Defense and aerospace industries, I left my quality engineering position to pursue another passion. My wife and I started our own business in the historic and cultural preservation field, helping communities identify assets that could be granted an historic landmark designation and taking them through that process.

We were fortunate to be able to work for ourselves for more than nine years. When we dissolved our business, and 12 years after leaving manufacturing, I returned to my first love, this time in the medical device industry. There, I was faced with new standards, technology, terms and products. There was one constant, however, amidst all that newness: The core quality principles and values remained rock solid.

It was as though I had never left quality; and, in some ways, I hadn't. After all, I never stopped using those quality principles I learned years ago.

Currently, a little more than a year into my renewed career—with core values still holding firm—I am an ASQ-certified biomedical auditor. I recently earned my first promotion and presented a session at the 20th Annual ASQ Quality Audit Division Conference in October 2011.

On the last day of the conference, I had a revelation. As leaders in the division were remembering past conferences, it in turn jogged my own memory.

Perhaps four years before I left manufacturing years ago, my career was gaining momentum. I had my first job as a quality engineer. I was in the middle of a huge restructuring of an internal audit program and looking to network. I thought that some of the projects I was working on might be of interest to others and sent a session proposal to present at an ASQ Audit Division Conference. The proposal was accepted but unfortunately due to a family emergency, I wasn't able to attend.

Fast forward 20 years. Upon getting back into manufacturing 16 months ago, I reconnected with ASQ and again submitted a proposal that was accepted to present at the 2011 conference. Just a few weeks before the conference, I was promoted once again to the position of quality engineer.

As I sat in the closing luncheon and listened to the speakers, I started thinking back and realized that, having just made quality engineer and looking to reach out, I was supposed to have presented at the division's first conference. Now, here I was, just promoted to quality engineer again, embarking on a new career, and actually presenting at its 20th. Talk about returning home and finding comfort in old friends—even those newly met.

Quality at home

Quality tools and concepts have not only been a constant in my professional career, but also in my personal life and among my family members.

While running my own business with my wife, I hiked through Aspen's mountains, walked along the Mississippi River's levees and sailed the Alaskan seas. I met personalities, such as Bob Edwards from National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" and Nicole Nichols from "Star Trek." I helped plan and coordinate an Olympic event, developed a nationally aired radio program and coordinated a best-selling author's book tour, among other things.

You might think quality principles are not applicable in a world of historic preservation, heritage tourism development and literature—but you would be wrong.

During my many projects spread throughout a decade, concepts such as product quality design, customer-driven quality, elimination of waste, root cause analysis, bridging the capacity gap and cost of quality were consistently used to great effect.

Later, when my wife became ill and things started to go astray on personal level due to lack of resources and inexperience in managing a household containing a sick wife and four teenagers, the place-do-check-act (PDCA) cycle and 5S (sort, set in order, shine, standardize and sustain) kept me organized, focused and on track.

During this time, long-range goal setting for my family was difficult, and we only handled day-to-day concerns as they came up. With time being in short supply, using PDCA provided a framework for strategizing, prioritizing and generating timelines. It also served as a reminder to continually check that things were running smoothly, especially with teenagers and their to-do lists. Additionally, the PDCA's teamwork aspect inspired me to bring my teenage children into the decision-making process of assigning chores and identifying opportunities for improvement around the home.

Lastly, I firmly believe a cluttered environment can lead to cluttered thinking. The 5S concept is one of the most efficient tools I know of for keeping organized and clearing clutter. Thus, implementing that strategy throughout my home environment was a no-brainer for me.

All the while I was growing professionally I was also growing more entranced with the quality profession itself. Early in my career, little did I know quality would become a passion that would follow me throughout my life, seeing me through good times and bad, professionally and personally. **QP**

Published in the January 2012 issue of Quality Progress magazine.
© 2011 Lance Coleman