

The Eight Quality Management Principles

What is the thinking behind each principle? How can they help specialist construction businesses?

1. Customer Focus

So what do we mean by Customer Focus? I think we can safely say that businesses depend on their customers, not that you'd notice in some organisations. Shouldn't we understand, completely and comprehensively, our customer's current and future needs? I do mean really understand! Can we say we fully know our customer's requirements and how to meet them? Shouldn't we make sure that we do? Doesn't the success – indeed the very survival of our businesses – depend on striving to meet and exceed our customer's expectations? Pretty difficult to do so without a genuine "customer focus". We can expect therefore that ISO 9001, in particular, will offer us some practical assistance in engendering a Customer Focus.

What might all this lovely customer focus lead to? Well would you accept that a perceptive grasp of what our customers want not only increases our chances of meeting and exceeding expectations but might also give us better ability to respond to market opportunities in a fast and flexible way? Furthermore, wouldn't that lead to increased revenue and market share?

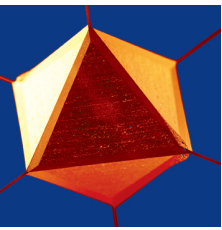
That understanding would surely make us more effective, in the use of our resources, in enhancing customer satisfaction; leading to customer loyalty and from there onto repeat business.

2. Leadership

I wonder how much has been written on the subject of Leadership. It's not my place to attempt to add to that, but to briefly look at leadership as a quality management principle and in the context of specialist contractors attempting to apply the requirements of the international standards. If nothing else the MD, Owner, whatever establishes the direction of the organisation. Whether he or she realises it or not he should also be ensuring unity of purpose, that everyone knows what they are doing and why. The leader creates the organisation's internal environment, its culture – sometimes by default! Surely we want an internal environment in which people can become fully involved in achieving the business's objectives. That will bring understanding and motivation towards the business's goals. We want alignment not miscommunication and that comes from leadership. Leadership plays a vital role in the implementation of international standards.

3. Involvement of people

Aren't people always involved? Well yes but are they engaged? "People are our greatest asset" is the platitude often wheeled out but it never ceases to amaze me how often it is not appreciated. Some organisations are able to acknowledge that, yes of course, people at all levels are the essence of an organisation but then fail to realise that their full involvement and engagement enables their abilities – if appreciated – to be used for the organisation's benefit.



4. Process Approach

What on earth do we mean by a Process Approach? This is the sort of language that turns some people off. Well very simply a "process" can be described as taking some inputs, doing something to them and churning out some outputs. I agree that, for some, "inputs" and "outputs" are not the easiest of words but I think we can all understand what that means, and isn't that we do in our businesses? We take tender documents, bills of quantity and specifications for example, apply our knowledge, experience and estimating processes, and create the output of a compliant tender document. Processes on sites in terms of inputs and outputs are even more obvious. The standards are based on the simple process philosophy of Plan-Do-Check and Act. When this process is applied to a business as a whole I think of the "Plan" as preparing your business to enter the market, the "Do" as clearly providing your product or service and the "Check and Act" as monitoring your performance and seeking to improve on it based on your observations. The standards declare that, "When activities are managed as a process desired results are achieved more efficiently, resources are used more effectively, results are more consistent and predictable, and improvement opportunities can be spotted and concentrated on more easily". The ISO Standards help us to achieve this.

5.A system approach to management

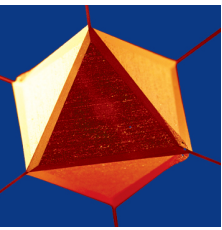
More jargon I'm afraid, who's getting turned off? Well this means that identifying and understanding and managing interrelated processes – for example estimating and tendering, planning, installation, commercial management, training - as a system contributes to the organisation's effectiveness and efficiency in achieving its objectives. We all want to avoid overlap and underlap.

6.Continual Improvement

I don't think anyone can argue with the concept of continual improvement. Surely continual improvement of the organisation's overall performance should be a permanent objective of any organisation. If you're not improving then what are you doing? Wiser heads than me say that you can't practically standstill; you are either improving or deteriorating. If continual improvement is a bedrock quality management principle underlying the quality management standards then we should again expect some practical guidance from the standards in knowing how to do it.

7.Factual Approach to Decision Making

A factual approach to decision making? Don't we always make decisions based on the facts? I wonder? Are the facts always available? Effective decisions come from the analysis of data and information. An old MD of mine used to say to me that "Quality information makes for quality decisions." What quality information do we need and where does it come from? Do we know what we need? Do we know how to get it? Have we really thought about it? This would suggest that the standards look to providing the facts to aid effective decision-making.



8. Mutually Beneficial Supplier Relationships

We all want mutually beneficial supplier relationships. But I've been treated appallingly by Main Contractors and also seen some colleagues not treat our own supply chain too respectfully. Any organisation and its suppliers are interdependent. A mutually beneficial relationship enhances the ability of both to create value. We talked above about the importance of customer focus and understanding what our customers want; do our suppliers and subcontractors know what we want? Do we tell them? Clearly? Do we know, really know, that we have the right suppliers? How do we choose our suppliers and subcontractors and how do we manage them?

So that was a quick general perspective on the quality management principles underlying the ISO 9000 series in particular. Hopefully however you can agree that the principles, applied properly can form a basis for performance improvement and organisational excellence. So having looked at the quality management principles we would expect the actual standards ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and OHSAS 18001 to embody these and guide us in improving the performance of our specialist construction businesses.

Obviously there are many different ways of applying these quality management principles. The nature of the organisation and the specific challenges it faces will determine how to implement them. The authors of the international standards have taken these principles and incorporated them into suggested frameworks, the ISO Standards, for managing our businesses. I hope you can see that all organisations will find it beneficial to set up quality management systems based on these principles.