

# Ian ponders... when is a business system not a system at all?

Those readers of QNewZ familiar with this column will know that I see our world in the systems context, tinted by ISO 9001, writes *Ian Hendra*. Here's what that means to me...

## Systems...

There are all sorts of systems in business these days. Quality assurance, Financial, Enterprise Risk, Occupational Safety & Health, Debt, Food Safety, Communication, Product development, Sales & Marketing, Facilities and so on – ad nauseam, it seems. All these are 'management systems' and many are underpinned by national and international standards that define the minimum requirements.

## What is a system?

I like this definition best, "A group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole." So, if you develop an international standard with agreed minimum requirements to be met, it follows that you have to develop the conformity criteria to match...or the 'conformity system' is not complete. Not rocket science, is it?

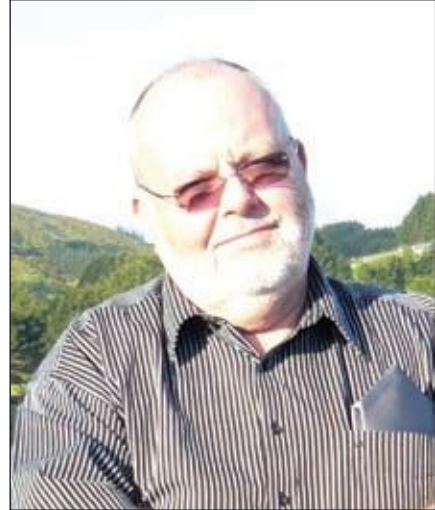
## Verification is the key...

It's unfortunate that none of these standards (that I can think of, anyway, and to include ISO 9001) is supported by similarly constituted verification standards that set the limits for what a claim of conformity means in reality. Now before anyone's dudgeon rushes for the nearest escalator, I do understand that guidance is published for many of these standards, but guidance is not the same as, for example, a test procedure with pass/fail criteria. In any case, most guidance standards declare that they're not for certification purposes so it follows that they are not criteria. Granted that with regard to ISO 9001, the accreditation bodies have words to say on the matter of auditing standards, and ISO itself does produce interpretation guidance, but again these are not published with the same rigour as the standards they purport to underpin. After all, accreditation bodies are closed shops, as are the certifiers who keep them in business, so the whole structure suffers from designed-in conflict of interest.

## Ergo, systems standards are not systemic

In this sense the ongoing development of management systems standards cannot represent a systematic approach because without complementary verification standards, there is no basis upon which to claim either relevance or conformity. For example, my world is riddled with ineffective and non-existent quality management systems holding certification to ISO 9001, but others clearly have different views.

All who are fully conversant with ISO 9001's requirements will tell you they are pivotal to business sustainability, but most of those same people have different views of how conformity is to be demonstrated. Metaphorically,



therefore, an ISO 9001 system can be both an apple and an orange. In my view that negates any claim at all for ISO 9001 (et al) to be rewarded as a system, particularly when it comes to claiming conformity or certification.

## Business excellence gets closer perhaps...

Maybe Baldrige is better in this regard. Certainly Baldrige's manifestation in New Zealand, the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF) not only publishes the standards to meet but also keeps tight control on the verification methods that underpin statements of conformity.

## Eye off the ball...

It's the gap in the system that bothers me most, and tampering, of course. If ever there was a classic case of tampering it was ISO 9001:2008. Under the five year rule it took ISO Committee TC 176 eight years to make no substantial changes to ISO 9001:2000. In the meantime, the number of certifications per capita in ISO 9001's mature markets such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand declined at an alarming rate and continue to do so.

Those with any savoir faire in our business know perfectly well that the ISO 9000 message is pivotal to business success. Yet there is no evidence that the standard's authors have any concerns at all that implementation among those claiming conformity is so variable as to range from world class performance at one end to not discernible at the other. I don't think this bodes well for our profession, what do you think?

## Let me know...

If you agree that TC 176 has its eye off the ball and that it needs to tackle implementation, I would be delighted to collate your feedback and forward it to them. I'd also be delighted to report what we get back in return!

For further information and to give Ian some feedback contact: [ian.hendra@clearlineservices.co.nz](mailto:ian.hendra@clearlineservices.co.nz)