

Guidance for Communication with Customers

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Included below are four sample approaches that may be used to establish mutually-beneficial communications between the organization and its customers. Other approaches may be applicable to an organization's business situation. In addition, the organization may use the concepts to work with its suppliers.

Approach A – Shared Expectations Team

One approach to communications is a voluntary shared expectations process. This is a process in which the organization works jointly with a customer to create an understanding of each other's expectations and improve quality on a continuing basis. The objective is a closer, long-term relationship between the two participants.

A joint team of the organization and customer personnel is formed to review expectations, identify gaps, and create the mechanism for reducing the gaps. An impartial, telecommunications-experienced facilitator may be added to the team when agreed to by both the customer and the organization. The team develops action items and tracks them on an action item register. Often, action items are worked on by joint task forces. Costs are shared by the customer and the organization.

It is recommended that the team meet at least twice a year. A number of tools are used for continual quality improvement, including the action item register and quality improvement methodologies. A typical agenda for the initial meeting may include:

- a) customer expectations,
- b) organization expectations,
- c) comparison of current performance against expectations,
- d) identification of gaps,
- e) development of action plans to address the gaps, and
- f) definition of measures to track and monitor the action plans.

Approach B – Quality Review Meetings

To facilitate communications, the customer and the organization are encouraged to meet periodically to discuss the organization's quality management system. It is recommended that meetings alternate between the organization location and customer site where equipment furnished by the organization is in operation.

Organization's Location

A sample meeting agenda for the organization's location meeting may include:

- a) nonconformances to TL 9000,
- b) sample of internal audit reports and related improvement actions,
- c) measurements,
- d) engineering complaints,
- e) product change notices,
- f) customer concerns,
- g) organization concerns, and
- h) action item registers.

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Customer Site Visit

Meet at a customer site where the organization's equipment has been operating for less than one year (preferably 3 to 6 months). All customer functions that were directly involved with the engineering, procurement, installation, activation, and operation of the equipment are invited to participate along with the organization representatives, which may include the program and/or product managers, quality and sales representatives, and others as appropriate.

The purpose of the visit is to obtain feedback on the entire process of procuring and operating equipment plus related services. Based on customer participants, the feedback would address some or all of the following:

- a) quality and reliability of hardware and software,
- b) ease of ordering,
- c) organization representatives,
- d) new product introduction,
- e) product delivery,
- f) technical support,
- g) documentation,
- h) product change notices,
- i) invoices,
- j) installation,
- k) repair, and
- l) training.

Other customer or supplier organization concerns should be discussed as well as a review/update to the action item register.

The feedback obtained in this visit should be documented and any issues included in an action item register with planned improvement actions by the organization and/or customer.

Approach C – Customized Reports

The organization provides periodic reports based on customer-identified needs. Such reports may include:

- a) hardware return rates,
- b) delivery performance,
- c) repair turnaround time,
- d) reported problems, and
- e) technical support activity.

Approach D – Program Reviews

Conduct periodic program reviews at customer or organization locations with an agenda that may include:

- a) current deliveries,
- b) forecast of future requirements,
- c) technical issues,
- d) product feature requests/needs,
- e) quality issues,
- f) ordering/invoicing issues,
- g) improvement opportunities relative to supplied products, and
- h) the customer and organization interface.

The action item register should be maintained and action items reported during each review or more often, if appropriate.