



D52 The Next Big Challenge for Quality Forensic Service

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After attending this presentation, attendees will obtain a wider understanding of quality and the organizational capabilities required to ensure a quality forensic service offering. Action plans are proposed to build these capabilities and to deal with the potential constraints encountered during implementation of a quality assurance program. Real-world illustrations will be given during the presentation

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating to forensic scientists whom too often adopt a narrow perspective of what constitutes a total quality assurance program. Quality management, however, entails more than focusing on technical aspects. People-related issues such as organizational culture, managerial preparation, generation and sharing of knowledge, talent management, communication and relationship management are equally - if not more important - to insure a quality program that continues to be relevant to the needs of the criminal justice system.

A forensic organization is a unique collection of highly differentiated resources, capabilities and expertise. Organizational capabilities are fundamental to performance and vital to the provision of a quality forensic service. Developing the relevant type and amount of capabilities valued by criminal justice system will help forensic organizations remain relevant and stay ahead in quality performance.

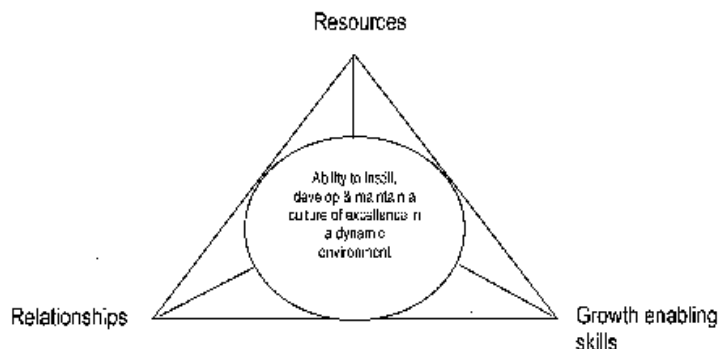
Our view and definition of quality is fundamental as it determines our priorities and allocation of resources to achieve the quality we desire. Quality has been variously defined as "innate excellence in terms of service specification," "free of errors and conform to design specification," "fit for its purpose," "meeting measurable characteristics required to satisfy a customer," and "value in relation to price." In the forensic fraternity, accreditation and certification have become buzzwords synonymous with quality. We submit that these are necessary but insufficient. There is little doubt that they impart a seal of quality to forensic organizations but a quality service delivery entails more than focusing on quality work processes and obtaining reliable scientific findings. Quality includes various other tangible and intangible assets likely to have significant impact on the service delivery process in the long run. In parallel with our restricted view of quality, there is presently, a lack of understanding of the capabilities required for delivering quality forensic services. Heavy emphasis is continually placed on technical capabilities (the integration of knowledge and skills of forensic scientists with equipment and technology) and stringent quality assurance to provide error-free services.

Objectives

The key issues of this paper are to identify:

1. organizational capabilities needed for delivering quality services and action plans required for building these capabilities
2. potential constraints for exploiting and leveraging these action plans

The bedrock of a quality service delivery process is the ability to instill, develop and maintain a culture of excellence in a dynamic environment. This bedrock is in turn based on three key factors: resources, growth-enabling skills and relationships, which in a balanced combination, constitutes a formidable tool for insuring a total quality program. Resources include the technical capabilities and expertise as well as an integrated team of committed professionals and a wide range of management skills. Growth-enabling skills encompasses knowledge generation and sharing, experimentation and learning, creativity and innovation. Lastly, special relationships refer to vital links and ties with colleagues, clients, suppliers, and international counterparts.





Culture of Excellence

Technology is a powerful driving force in the forensic field. New technologies usher in new possibilities, new expectations and new services. Benefits sought by the criminal justice system change in importance over time. Keeping pace with these technological advances requires a constant upgrading of our instrumentation and technical capabilities. However, cultivating a learning organization that welcomes and embraces change appears to be an even more fundamental requirement. It is critical for the entire organization to be educated on the change process. We need to have correct attitudes and capabilities and be vigilant of driving forces and flexible to change. We have to align to a common vision and mission, and understand and live the core values of the organization. High caliber personnel with integrity, commitment, motivation and expertise are required to fit the bill.

Talent Management

People are the crown jewels and the most important asset in any forensic organization. Hence, talent must be deliberately managed and retained by identifying training roadmaps for staff, designing challenging jobs and creating strong teams. Adequate funds need to be set aside for training and development of forensic examiners. Learning opportunities must be planned and provided for them on an on-going basis to develop and strengthen their capabilities and for them to grow with the organization. They must be recognized for their efforts made in the investigative process. Talent management may be a laborious and sometimes painful organizational process but it will produce both short and long-term benefits in terms of succession planning or downsizing, ensuring a smooth transition to capable practitioners and leaders, or shedding of uncommitted and under-performing staff when casework volume declines in certain areas.

Managerial Preparation

Managers need to be equipped with the necessary management skills. Most organizations effectively prepare their managers in the technical domain, ensuring their ongoing professional development. Forensic agencies however, often neglect training senior staff for management responsibilities, which have greater ambiguity and require more interpersonal skills. Forensic managers also often lack knowledge and skills to apply techniques of marketing to strategically position their organizations.

Knowledge sharing and transfer

Knowledge resides in people's heads and is therefore a highly mobile resource. It is vital for top management to manage intellectual resources and capabilities such that knowledge is transferred, stored and institutionalized. Unlike capital and physical assets, knowledge increases when it is disseminated, used and shared. Our organizations need to offer the necessary culture and support to mandate and strongly encourage knowledge behavior by evaluating people on the basis of it and rewarding those who consistently display it. We have to develop means to keep a record of the people who have the know-how to solve specific problems so that others can quickly locate them and tap their know-how when the need arises. Continual observation and careful analysis is required to convert tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge.

Communication and relationship management

The ability to network and collaborate internally and externally is critically important in forensic science. Linkages between labs create synergies, and contacts with international counterparts enable an organization to tap new expertise, benchmark its processes and systems and shorten its learning curve. International collaboration will set new heights for quality performance and enhance an organization's reputation. Lastly, an interactive and informative service encounter crowns the service delivery process. Forensic examiners need to discuss cases with law enforcers, practice progressive reporting to convey significant results and explain the implications of the final report, whether it is intended for investigation, intelligence or prosecution.

Potential Constraints

Constraints that may potentially hinder the implementation of action plans stem from 2 major factors:

1. the organization's willingness and ability to identify and develop its employees
2. forensic examiners' ability, aptitude and willingness to learn

It is not easy for top managers to walk the talk and they have to understand their own strengths and weaknesses and be honest about what they know and do not know. It is even more difficult to cultivate a culture of sharing and learning and constant alignment to the organization's mission, vision and core values.

Conclusion

The organizational capabilities perspective provides a more holistic approach to creating quality services. However, it is insufficient to simply cling onto a bundle of capabilities. Capabilities need to be constantly reviewed, modified, honed and rebuilt to keep pace with the everchanging demands of clients and advances in technology. Forensic organizations will have to constantly reinforce the view that producing top quality work is



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everyone's job. The prerequisites for quality performance are excellence in learning through the relentless benchmarking of critical measures, setting stretch targets and challenging people to achieve them. Most importantly, an organization must develop the enabling infrastructure, ideologies, resources and capabilities to support and deliver this goal.

Forensic Service, Quality, Organizational Capabilities