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Editor's Message



What We Mean by "Quality" by Daniel Holland

To exceed our customers' quality expectations I believe we must first understand who our customer is.

What do we mean when we use the word "quality" to describe our products and services? What do our customers mean when they ask for "quality"? Do we mean the same things? How can we be certain we are producing products and services that exceed expectations?

This issue of SBC is devoted to the subject of "quality" in the manufacturing of structural building components. The articles in this issue give you some specific answers to the questions posed above, especially with regard to compliance with the design drawings and assurance that load carrying expectations are met. But is that all there is to "quality" in the structural building component industry? Read on for a look at the big picture.

We all agree that product geometry and load carrying ability are the primary quality concerns for building components. For wood trusses, we have a recently-revised written standard, based on testing and mathematical analysis, which helps us inspect the most critical joints rather than spending time and effort on joints that are not likely to affect the ability of the truss to carry the intended load. This is a good thing! But, is that all our customers are asking for when they ask for good quality?

DETERMINE WHO DEMANDS QUALITY

To exceed their quality expectations I believe we must first understand who our customer is. Most of us realize that the people who send us the checks in the mail are our customers, but are they the only ones making demands of us with regard to the quality of our products and services? I would suggest that anyone who comes in contact with our products and services is in some sense our customer. The architect, engineer, owner, building official, general contractor, project manager, framing contractor, and even employees of your company are your customers in some ways, and they all have an opinion about the quality of your company and its products and services. We all know that opinions are the one thing that everybody is willing to share, so their opinions are important. We need them all to be convinced that our company provides good quality products and services.

The first step is to foster a culture of doing things right. Corporate culture is established by every person who makes up your company but is influenced in proportion to an individual's authority and responsibility in the company. That means you can help your company expect to

do things right no matter what your position might be. If you are the boss, however, you are the most important person in establishing your company's self-expectations about quality. But having everyone in your company concerned about doing things right is not enough.

STANDARDS + COMMUNICATION = QUALITY

How do people in your company know when things are being done right? The answer to this question has two parts. The first is to have documented standards to tell your people how to do the tasks you want them to do. The quality section of ANSI/TPI 1-2002 (Chapter 3) is an appropriate example of such a standard. The second part of the answer to the above question is to get your employees to listen to their customers. By "customers" I mean the people described above, not just the folks who pay the invoices.

Communication is a rare skill in our time. Most of us have mastered only half of what is required to communicate well. The part we do not do well is listening. What does it mean to listen? I believe listening involves several things, all of which require effort. The essential goal in listening is to understand the intent of the speaker as well as the detail of the message. The difficulty in accomplishing this goal is a result of the volume of communication we must process. Creating systems to effectively "listen" to our customers as well as training ourselves and our workers to listen results in knowledge of the expectations of our company's products and services.

Armed with the knowledge of our customers' expectations and developing a "culture of quality," we are ready to accomplish the "control" or "assurance" part of QC or QA. In plain English, we need a system to check and report to us if our products and services do not exceed our customers' expectations. Every company's system is different and needs to fit its nature and customers. But every QA or QC system depends on the relevance of the items being checked and the diligence and attentiveness of the people doing the checking.

What does your quality control system look like? Does it work? If it is based on the expectations of your customers and the people in your company care about the quality of what your company produces, then I'm certain it does.

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