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THE ADDED VALUE OF IMPROVED QUALITY CULTURE IN ISO 9001:2026

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Abstract
The sixth edition of the standard with requirements for quality management systems, ISO 9001, has just been published on 16 September 2026. One of its key changes is the increased focus on quality culture. This paper presents possible ways to benefit from an inspiring and engaging quality culture. The examples in the paper are developed at the Technical University of Gabrovo and are aimed at the overall enhancement of the existing quality management system.

Keywords: quality culture, ISO 9001:2026, ISO 10010:2022, quality management systems, quality management principles.

INTRODUCTION

The ISO Survey 2025 reports valid accredited management system certificates from 1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025. According to this most recent management system standards (MSS) survey, ISO 9001:2015 remains the standard with the most certificates (1611729) and certified permanent locations (2419972) worldwide [1]. It is followed by ISO 14001 for environmental management systems and ISO 45001 for occupational health and safety management systems. A new addition to the ISO Survey of 18 MSS is the standard ISO/IEC 42001:2023 for artificial intelligence management systems.

The ISO 9000 series of standards has undergone updates in 2026 with the publishing of the fifth edition of ISO 9000 and the sixth edition of ISO 9001, the drafting of a new edition of ISO 9002, and the expected revision of ISO 9004 in 2027. This happens just a few years after the publication of ISO 10010 – the standard for quality culture – that serves as a wake-up call for those quality managers who have gotten used to the 2015 version of ISO 9001.

Several authors have researched the topic of quality culture. Harvey and Stensaker argue that "quality culture has become a taken-for-granted concept" [2]. In their paper Bendermacher et al. claim that "leaders are central 'drivers' of quality culture development through their ability to influence resource allocation, clarify roles and responsibilities, create partnerships and optimise people and process management" [3]. Durana et al. suggest that quality culture can help organizations make the leap from traditional quality improvement to innovations and Industry 4.0 [4]. The findings contained in the research by Jinhui Wu et al. confirm that a mature quality culture positively impacts the operational performance of organizations [5].

The purpose of this paper is to present an up-to-date overview of quality culture in the ISO 9000 series of standards and the possible ways it can inspire and engage the leaders, managers and staff of any organization.

EXPOSITION

Quality Culture in ISO 9000

ISO 9000:2026 has restructured and revamped the content of its predecessor, ISO 9000:2015 [6]. This standard now follows the Harmonized Structure (HS), previously

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known as the High-Level Structure of ISO MSS or Annex SL to the ISO Directives.

The number of terms and definitions has been increased from 138 to 172. Two terms deserve special attention: "culture" and "quality culture". The definition in [6] for the term culture is "integrated shared values, beliefs, history, ethics, attitudes and observed behaviours". The definition for "quality culture" expands this notion as follows: "culture supporting the achievement of a quality policy and objectives, and the delivery of products and services that meet the needs and expectations of customers and other interested parties" [6].

The seven quality management principles (QMP) have remained unchanged [7]. Nevertheless, they still remain the basis for setting an organization's quality policy and refer to "quality culture" on a number of occasions. QMP2 "Leadership" includes the following possible actions:

- Create and sustain shared values, fairness, and trust at all levels of the organization, and
- Establish and promote a quality culture and ethical behaviour.

This is expected to lead in QMP3 "Engagement of people" to "increased attention to shared values and culture throughout the organization" as an expected benefit.

QMP5 "Improvement" also tackles quality culture as a means to "recognize and acknowledge improvement".

Quality culture is one of the Top 10 fundamental quality management concepts. Clause 4.3.9 "Organizational quality culture" states that it is "influenced and consistently reinforced through the behaviours and attitudes of people within an organization". This means that leaders, top management and ordinary staff alike all play a crucial role in making quality culture not just a nice slogan but a day-to-day reality.

Every organization is unique, and its quality culture should reflect local customs, traditions and cultures, as well as the specific organizational context and the relevant interested parties of the organization.

ISO 9000:2026 also lists some benefits that can be expected when quality culture is embedded successfully:

- Improved work environment, especially in a psychological sense;
- Competitive edge, making the organization a more desirable employer;
- Effective and efficient performance of quality management processes and of the quality management system as a whole;
- Cohesive teams;
- High morale;
- Strong focus on the achievement of the organization's quality objectives and freedom for their alignment with personal goals;
- Increased satisfaction of staff, customers, suppliers and other interested parties.

Quality Culture in ISO 9001

Some critics say that the revision of ISO 9001 is minor compared to its 2015 edition [8]. This might be true to a certain extent, especially considering the minor structural change in Clause 6.1 – the separation of actions to address risks from actions to address opportunities, and merging the content of the previous clauses 10.1 "General" and 10.3 "Continual improvement" into the new clause 10.1, which is also named "Continual improvement" as in the HS.

Previously, culture was mentioned only in Notes 2 and 3 to clause 4.1 "Understanding the organization and its context". This mention remains, but now, even at the beginning of the standard, the foreword to ISO 9001:2026 states that "Quality culture and ethical behaviour are now addressed within the requirements, particularly in relation to leadership,

awareness and the environment for the operation of processes" [8].

There is an added requirement in clause 5.1 "Leadership and commitment". Leaders shall demonstrate their commitment to the quality management system by "promoting quality culture and ethical behaviour" [8]. This requirement is clarified by Note 2: "An organization's quality culture and ethical behaviour are reflected in its shared values, attitudes, practices and actions." [8].

The text of the note in clause 7.1.4 "Environment for the operation of processes" has been modified to state that "Some factors can be influenced by the organizational quality culture and ethical behaviour" [8]. These factors are mainly psychological and social, and to a lesser extent, physical.

A new requirement related to quality culture is added to clause 7.3 "Awareness" "The organization shall ensure that persons doing work under the organization's control are aware of the organizational quality culture and ethical behaviour." [8].

Annex A of ISO 9001:2026 "provides clarification to assist users in understanding the requirements in this document" and at the same time does not replace the guidance of ISO/TS 9002:2016 for implementation of ISO 9001. The annexes that clarify the requirements for quality culture are:

- A.5.1 "Leadership and commitment";
- A.5.2 "Quality policy";
- A.7.3 "Awareness"

The bibliography specifically directs the readers and users of ISO 9001:2026 to familiarize themselves with ISO 10010, "Quality management — Guidance to understand, evaluate and improve organizational quality culture".

Quality Culture in ISO/TS 9002

This standard provides guidelines for the application of ISO 9001:2015 [9]. This fact is not worrying when considering that ISO/TS was published in 2016, i.e., a year after ISO 9001. Currently, the ISO 9002 standard is at a DIS (Draft International Standard) stage, and its voting closed on 2026-09-09 before entering the final draft (FDIS) stage [10]. Thus, the discussion of quality culture will reflect the current edition of ISO/TS 9002:2016:

- Clause 4.1 "Understanding the organization and its context": quality culture is presented as one of the factors that shape the internal context of the organization, namely "human aspects such as competence of persons, organizational behaviour and culture, relationships with unions" [9];
- Clause 5.1 "Leadership and commitment" states that leadership and commitment can be demonstrated and influences by factors "such as the size and complexity of an organization, management style and organizational culture" [9];
- Clause 6.1 "Actions to address risks and opportunities" describes risk-based thinking in an organization as "a proactive and preventive culture focused on doing things better and improving how work is done in general" [9];
- Clause 7.5 "Documented information" considers organizational culture a possible reason to create, update and provide quality management system documentation in more than one language.

Quality Culture in ISO 9004

Quality culture is a frequent term in the clauses of this standard, which is devoted to achieving the sustained success of an organization [11].

Clause 4.2 "Managing for the sustained success of an organization" suggests that top management should "determine, implement and communicate the organization's mission, vision and values, and promote an aligned culture" [11].

An entire clause 6.2 “Mission, vision, values and culture” highlights the dynamic relationship of these factors in shaping the identity of an organization. Culture is expressed as “beliefs, history, ethics, observed behaviour and attitudes that are interrelated with the identity of the organization” [11]. It is extremely important that the quality culture is aligned with the organization’s mission, vision, and values. In addition, knowing what the current quality culture is and having a vision of what it should look like in the future requires a review by top management and evokes a change management process at an organizational level.

Other mentions of quality culture can be found in the following clauses of ISO 9004:

- 5 “Leadership”;
- 8.3 “Responsibility and authority for processes”;
- 9.2.4 “Competence of people”;
- 9.6 “Externally provided resources”;
- 10.6 “Self-assessment”;
- 10.7 “Reviews”;
- 11.2 “Improvement”;
- 11.3 “Learning”.

A key tool for understanding the maturity of a quality culture is Table A.4 “Self-assessment of the detailed elements of 6.2” [11]. It is presented in 5 maturity levels, from Level 1 (the lowest) to Level 5 (the highest). At Level 1, quality culture is established informally and ad hoc. At Level 2, quality culture is understood, but the need for changing it is not recognized. At Level 3, there is an established process to change the current organizational culture, if needed. At Level 4, The organization’s quality culture is aligned with its mission, vision, strategic direction and values. At Level 5, there is a consideration of external and internal issues (circumstances, context) as part of the verification of alignment between the elements of the identity of the organization, including its quality culture.

One could reasonably expect updated definitions and descriptions of the maturity levels in the upcoming edition of ISO 9004.

Quality Culture in ISO 10010

This standard is considered a supporting guidance document that enhances the understanding and implementation of the requirements of ISO 9001 in relation to an organization’s quality culture [12]. It comprises the following clauses, the main ones of which are aligned to the PDCA (*Plan, Do, Check, Act*) cycle:

- Foreword;
- Introduction;
- 1 Scope;
- 2 Normative references;
- 3 Terms and definitions;
- 4 Context of the organization;
- 5 Determine desired quality culture (*Plan*);
- 6 Determine current quality culture; (*Plan*)
- 7 Determine (*Plan*) and implement (*Do*) actions to achieve desired quality culture;
- 8 Embed (*Do*) desired quality culture;
- 9 Sustain (*Act*) desired quality culture.

The sequence and interactions of these steps are visually represented in the quality culture framework, i.e., Figure 1 of ISO 10010 [12]. Figure 2 in the same standard provides an example of a relationship between quality culture, organizational culture, and the organization’s context.

The informative Annex A “Evaluation examples” presents an example of a quality culture survey. Table A.1 in this annex is a checklist that contains 12 statements that are assessed on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). Table A.2 is an example self-assessment tool to evaluate quality culture by providing contrasting statements of desirable and undesirable quality culture examples.

The Technical University of Gabrovo, Bulgaria, has developed a questionnaire to

assess its quality culture. This questionnaire is based on Annex A of ISO 10010:2022 and is created using Google Forms. Upon publishing the questionnaire and completing it by all interested academic and administrative staff, the analysis of the results will be used to improve the ISO 9001-certified quality management system of the Technical University of Gabrovo.

CONCLUSION

The added value and main benefits from a carefully constructed quality culture can be demonstrated by increased awareness, involvement and engagement by all leaders, managers and employees of an organization.

This paper has presented a comprehensive overview of the current state of the ISO 9000 series of standards, and more specifically, their clauses with requirements and guidance related to an organisation's quality culture.

Depending on an organisation's maturity, which can be assessed using ISO 9004, specific action plans can be made to improve the existing quality culture. Useful guidance for a transition to a desired quality culture can be obtained from the standard ISO 10010:2022.

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