

Article

Coaching as a tool for improving QMS implementation – a case study in a shared service center in Romania

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Abstract: This paper investigates the role of coaching in driving performance improvement during the implementation of quality management systems (QMS) in a Romanian shared service center. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study aims to answer three key questions: Could overall project implementation be improved by using coaching techniques? Can coaching techniques enhance overall project implementation? Was coaching a relevant tool for the core project team? And could coaching methods be used to support the development of a quality culture? The findings demonstrate that organizational coaching played a crucial role in enhancing employee engagement, designing solutions, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Coaching interventions facilitated the overcoming of resistance to change, clarification of roles and responsibilities, and development of necessary skills. Leadership endorsement and a structured coaching framework were identified as important factors for achieving success. The current research contributes to the existing literature on coaching for performance improvement in QMS implementation, specifically in shared service centers. It offers practical insights for organizations aiming to implement QMS effectively and leverage coaching as a tool for driving performance improvement. The study emphasizes the need for tailored coaching approaches in alignment with the organizational and cultural context.

Keywords: coaching; performance improvement; quality management systems; shared service center; Romania;

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of implementing a Quality Management System (QMS) in European companies (Heras Saizarbitoria, Arana Landín, and Casadesús, 2006; Psomas, 2013; Hys, 2014). These benefits include improved customer satisfaction, enhanced product/ service quality, increased efficiency, reduced operational costs, improved aspects of risk management, and increased competitiveness. While QMS implementation can bring significant advantages, it is not without challenges. Some common obstacles include initial costs, lack of necessary expert knowledge for implementation, resistance to change of the employees, lack of employee engagement during and after the implementation, difficulties in integrating QMS with existing processes, and compliance with complex regulatory requirements. (Heras Saizarbitoria, Arana Landín, and Casadesús, 2006; Psomas, 2013; Hys, 2014).

As this paper presents a case study of QMS implementation, it reviews some of the classical issues in project management implementation, referring to setting goals, project scope, budget, communication issues, absence of engagement and accountability, impractical deadlines. Moreover, the article highlights the uses of coaching as a concrete tool for closing performance gaps in the context of QMS implementation projects. As the implementation of the QMS involves an update of the organizational culture as to highlight and improve the awareness of quality related topics and support continuous improvement, coaching was used consistently during the implementation of the QMS and furthermore as a sustainability tool for various changes within the organization.

Evidence from existing literature suggests that coaching methods can effectively support the development of a quality culture. Previous studies have highlighted various methods and techniques such as goal setting, collaborative problem solving, evaluation of end-to-end results and public presentation (Olivero et al., 1997) and 360 degrees assessment forms Niemes, (2002). Moreover, the implementation of the QMS raised a series of challenges for which multiple types of solutions were devised, however we shall focus only on those that involved elements of coaching, such as GROW (Whitmore, 1996) ACHIEVE (Dembkowski and Eldridge, 2012), OSKAR (Jackson and McKergow, 2007), elements of stealth coaching (Kramer, 2020) powerful questions, SKS (DeLong and DeLong, 2011).

More specifically, the research questions the article tries to answer are could overall project

implementation be improved by using coaching techniques? Was coaching a relevant tool for the core project team? Could coaching methods be used to support the development of a quality culture?

METHODOLOGY

As this paper presents a case study involving the implementation of a QMS in a shared service center in Romania, it is useful to note that the context involves a transdisciplinary approach, bringing together aspects of quality management, project management and human resources, more specifically training and coaching methods.

Moreover, as the researcher was part of the project team that was responsible for implementing the QMS based on ISO 9001:2015, action research (Kemmis, 2010) is part of the methodology. As part of the building of the case study, other methodologies are worth mentioning, such as descriptive statistics for the data presented, semi-structure interview with the core team and project team members, analysis of documentation.

CASE STUDY: QMS IMPLEMENTATION IN SSC

The shared service center is located in Bucharest, Romania, and it has around 950 employees. It serves as a centralized location providing several hundred processes (financial, sales, human resources, logistics) for companies from 17 countries in Europe.

The QMS implementation project was initiated in November 2021 and ended in October 2022. The context of the project is a top management decision to have a clearer overview on quality related topics, in line with the overall group strategy, which places customer satisfaction very high. Although at the strategic level quality was already part of the managerial discourse, on the operational level things were not as clear. In a group-wide initiative aiming at business optimization as part and because of the pandemic context that impacted several business-related aspects, some of the individual contributors were a bit confused about what were the important aspects. We could say that at the beginning of the project, quality-related aspects were not really a part of the business-as-usual discussion, emerging only when a customer complaint was registered. And then, the issues are solved on a case-by-case basis, with not a clear tracking as they seem to be subject to “quick fixes”.

The initial context the SSC has several elements of which could be incorporated in a QMS, but no quality related process per se, nor a clear managerial review process on quality related topics. The aim of the top management was to create a dashboard of quality relevant KPIs, shape the culture of the organization as to bring the quality aspects closer to all the employees, and prepare for the ISO 9001:2015 certification.

The core team of the project was composed of 13 people, one project lead and 12 QMS representatives, one for each area in the QMS scope. The project phases were as following: awareness and mobilization -set up of project organization (two months), development of the QMS and documentation – which included performing of a gap analysis (four months), implementation and training (three months), internal audit (two months) and Management review (two weeks).

During the awareness and mobilization phase, the setup of the project was created and documented. At this state the roles and responsibilities (as a first version) of the QMS representatives were created and the core project team was designated.

The next project phase, development of the QMS and documentation started with the analysis of existing documentation and the status quo in the organization, and it involved a gap analysis between the *as is* (current status in the SSC) and the *to be* (as per the ISO 9001:2015) requirements. The high-level assessment of the GAPs identified what is missing, what needs to be restructured, and focused on necessary means to improve the culture of quality in the overall culture of the organization.

As the initial gaps were identified, the core team built „stories” (as per the agile management terminology). Stories are created in the „Backlog” section and then moved to „in progress”, “in approval”, and „implemented” buckets respectively. The concept of sprints was not used consistently, as they were not part of the culture of the organization, but the general idea of a sprint was followed in the sense that the team had to work on something specific for a week or two and then deliver results. As all the stories were always fully transparent and available on a planning board, necessary preparations step could be taken proactively by the teams and communication kept with the planning board in one location.

Although many good practices and elements of a quality culture were in place in the organization, the vision of the leadership was to have the project members feel engaged with the topic and become ambassadors in their operational teams. During the implement and train phase of the project, quality related aspects were defined as clear tasks and the

aim was to have quality aspects become salient features of the culture in the organization, becoming “the way we do things that make us proud”.

The QMS implementation in the SSC aimed to make sure that the quality aspect is very clear in the process, that non-conformities are defined and clarify the key performance indicators (KPIs), meaning a minimum set to monitor the quality aspects of the overall organization.

In the initial planning stage of the QMS implementation, the topic of coaching was specifically included. However, as the implementation of the project involved more and more employees of the organization, the need to further support the initiative became relevant and an action plan was drafted. Training on the QMS was included in the project charter however, a very detailed needs assessment was not performed, given that the organizational of the project team was not fully clear.

FINDINGS: IMPACT OF COACHING METHODS USED

Solving challenges using organizational coaching

The implementation of the QMS raised a series of challenges such as unclear goals, scope creep, impractical deadlines, visible mismatch between existing and needed skills, and absence of accountability. Various types of solutions were devised to address these challenges.

However, our focus will be specifically on those that involved elements of coaching, such as GROW (Whitmore, 1996) ACHIEVE (Dembkowski and Eldridge, 2012), OSKAR (Jackson and McKergow, 2007), elements of stealth coaching (Kramer, 2020), powerful question techniques and SKS (DeLong and DeLong, 2011). We will highlight the methods used in connection with the problems.

From a *project management perspective*, although the goals seem to be clear, the project team discovered that in practice they lack specificity level of task completion, making implementation problematic in the absence of clearly defined business requirements. Unclear goals are connected to unclear expectations and therefore difficult to predict the assessment of actual outcomes against not so transparent expectations. As part of the project discussion, the core team got familiar with three main coaching methods: GROW (Whitmore, 1996) ACHIEVE (Dembkowski and Eldridge, 2012), OSKAR (Jackson and McKergow, 2007). Using these models as support in the goal definition for the high level of the project and to the level of individual contributors.

Following the before mentioned point about *unclear objectives*, the project team experience scope creep, meaning the continuous change of scope, which was expected by the steering committee since it is a classic project management challenge that refers the way project requirements deviate from what was originally agreed at project initiation. Upon completion of the gap assessment stage, a new round of agreement and alignment was necessary between the core team of the project and the steering committee. As part of the planning sessions in the Sprints a list of powerful questions was used to create clarity. This resulted in a constant reprioritization of the most relevant aspects of the implementation and the cancelling of some of the tasks that the team considered bringing insufficient value. The concept of rolling prioritization was adopted in some of the operational teams because of team managers practicing it in the QMS implementation project.

As a main feedback point from the core team to the project manager, the exercise of reprioritization of tasks was appreciated and created a flexibility in the task completion that ultimately aided in the project implementation. As a proxy for motivation and engagement of the core team in the project we used the attendance of project responsible to meetings. For the core team the attendance rate was 82%, while for the workshops the attendance rate was 78%. These rates do not speak by themselves but by comparison to other projects, where attendance was much less.

Another challenge that appeared periodically referred to *impractical deadlines*. Due to the lack of a program office to coordinate and create synergies among the projects, some aspects of the project implementation suffered several rounds of prioritization. However, at an early stage the core team decided to adjust the classic project management with agile elements and design stories and define sprints. One of the coaching techniques that added value was KISS

Communication as an instrument and approach can make or break a project, so we looked at the elements of good communication, meaning team members work well together (limited tensions within the team), tasks are allocated efficiently (no overload), and stakeholders are kept in the loop about project progress (good results). Feedback was an integral part of communication. As an alternative, the team was introduced to the Phil Daniels's process called SKS, meaning asking others what you should stop doing, what you should keep doing, and what you should start doing (DeLong and DeLong, 2011).

Given the context of a QMS implementation, at the beginning of the project there was a clearly visible

mismatch between core team skills and skills needed for the implementation. Insufficient knowledge in the organization lead to a distinct part of the project that has defined all the quality related competences that were necessary to be added to the roles. As the project advanced and training was delivered to the core team, the work environment for your team improved. As methods used in this project created more awareness in the company regarding coaching, they also had the side effect of more employees becoming interested in the already existing mentoring program.

Training on quality definitions and tools was paired with coaching on the job- as part of the project a specific number of people were trained in QMS related tools as these people were able to train other people. In the previous organizational setup, they were only obliged to transfer technical information, however in the new setup, coaching points were added to the agenda. As previous studies show (Olivero et al., 1997) 1:1 coaching is effective as a training transfer tool, as those coached achieve increases in productive significantly higher than with training alone. This study confirms our findings that the productivity increase is supported by goal setting, and public presentations as critical factors. Lastly, *the absence of accountability* is assessed as one of the challenges in project implementation. Accountability means every member of your team is responsible for their decisions and actions. This isn't about handing out blame if things go wrong but about empowering the project team to get things done the way they want to in the absence of micromanagement from the project manager. Accountability in the workplace is associated with an increase in work commitment and higher performance. To create the setup to support accountability, the core team of the project attended workshops on goal setting (using GROW, ACHIEVE and OSKAR methods) and later coached team members on setting goals.

Coaching methods used for closing gaps

In this section, we will examine the project implementation using the perspective of the types of gaps closed using coaching methods. The researchers selected gaps in the following ISO standard sections: *5.1 Leadership & commitment, 5.3 Organizational roles, responsibilities, and authorities, 9.1 Monitoring, measurement, analysis and evaluation, and 9.3 Management review.*

As per the gap analysis, for full implementation of section *5.1 Leadership & commitment*, the measures deemed necessary to close the gaps referred to definition of clear quality objectives, rewards for innovation & improvement. The coaching method

used was GROW to support the goal definitions of the teams involved. The method was presented to the core team and then cascaded to all project members in planning meetings for the sprints and then the retrospective meetings. As a result of the implementation and all the interaction that happened in team, a sort training on informal coaching was developed and noted as a “lesson learned” in the project. A short checklist combining project management phases and potential activities including coaching methods was created to support future projects and their project managers during implementation.

To create the culture of quality, the organization's objectives on quality were connected to the target agreements of the core team. The target agreement is a list of KPIs that the employee agrees with the direct manager, and it becomes the basis of the yearly performance assessment of said employee. As the performance of the core team was tied to the project performance, the organization added a clear incentive for the long-term success of the QMS. Moreover, each head of the business divisions received quality related KPIs which flowed to operational teams.

As quality aspects become a relevant measurement of performance of employees, most roles and job descriptions have been reviewed to define the impact of achieving the quality KPIs in the performance assessment. Moreover, the core team collaborated with the human resources department to create a list of quality related competences and the necessary training necessary to achieve the identified competences. A calendar for job description updates was created in sync with the training schedule part of the QMS implementation project.

Additional measures to close the gaps for *section 9.1 Monitoring, measurement, analysis and evaluation* referred to creation of KPI Dashboard, review meetings and updates to the customer survey methodology that already existed in the organization. The KPI Dashboard served as a quantitative assessment of current progress while review meetings created the setting for continuous improvement measures to be developed.

As per the implementation status board reflecting the percentage of the tasks that were completed on time was high (78%). This quantitative method is supported by the qualitative approach of feedback collected during retrospective meetings with the core team, assessing the overall project implementation progress as “good” and “very good”. Moreover, the core team tracked via the dashboard the necessary follow-up – additional iterations of communication – and assessed the need

for additional follow-up as “relatively low”, as stories moved quickly from „to do” – to „approval”. Another proxy for a job well done is that the feedback from the higher managerial level was very good, with few insignificant implication changes required from the steering committee to move things along.

One relevant leading indicator for the quality culture was the number of the Root Cause Analysis – Root Cause Corrective Actions (RCA-RCCA) documented by the operational teams. The RCA-RCCA workshops involving the aspects of change of culture were deployed at the beginning of the QMS implementation as it was considered an essential tool. In the initial workshops the team managers and one or two senior experts from each team was selected to attend. Beyond the actual methods and RCA-RCCA analysis, the workshop included discussions on collaborative problem-solving skills and attitudes, highlighting the importances of powerful questions in the process. One feedback point from teams attending the workshops was that the coaching elements supported the creation of a safe environment for the team to raise a problem, asking for support, and developing a solution in an autonomous manner.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper reviewed some of the challenges faced by the core team in the implementation of the QMS, and also mentioned the coaching tools and methods that support the implementation. The case study shows that the overall project implementation was supported and improved using the coaching techniques. The methods used in this project created more awareness in the company and they also had the side effect of more employees becoming interested in the mentoring program in the company. Considering the findings mentioned above, including the uses of the coaching methods and elements of the quality culture, we reflect to the research questions. As per the first question, *could overall project implementation be improved by using coaching techniques?* As per the data collected during meetings -and the tracking of the status of tasks, the percentage of the tasks that were completed on time was high, additional follow up for task completion was very low, feedback on the higher managerial level was very good.

As per the second question, *was coaching a relevant tool for the core project team?* The perception of the 12 people in the core team was that the coaching methodologies created more flexibility during the design phase, contributed to on time task completion

and supported the adoption of the RCA-RCCA analysis. Moreover, looking at the list of „lessons learned” that emerged. As a result of the implementation and all the interaction that happened in team, the project team delivered to the human resources department a short training on informal coaching methods to be used in future implementations. A checklist containing project phases and activities adapted with coaching methods that could support the reaching of the project objectives was created and added to the organizational knowledge. Another element of success was the adoption of the stop/ keep/ start doing method in the operational teams as a result of the exposure of team managers to the technique during the project implementation.

The RCA-RCCA workshops consolidated collaborative problem solving in teams. One feedback point from teams attending the workshops was that the coaching elements supported the creation of a safe environment for the team to raise a problem, asking for support, and developing a solution in an autonomous manner.

As per the third question, the general opinion is that coaching methods could be used to support the development of a quality culture, as it greatly facilitates communication within the teams. As the QMS implies the principle of continuous improvement, and measurements are highly used, coaching comes with a softer approach. For both during the project implementation and the project sustainability, mainly focusing on the continuous improvement and quality culture, coaching methods contributed to improving 1:1 meeting and goals setting.

As a point of further research, we propose to test the coaching framework on several more cases to check the resilience of the methods but also explore opportunities to use other methods and synergies with project management tool.

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