

Evolution of Quality:

Patrick Tremblay | DCMA Public Affairs



Michael Shields, Defense Contract Management Agency's Quality Assurance Directorate executive director, is working to build an expanding "community of practice" from the agency's 3,000 quality engineers and specialists. (Photo by Patrick Tremblay, DCMA Public Affairs)

Three years ago the Defense Contract Management Agency introduced its Strategic Plan, which Director Charlie E. Williams, Jr., said "builds on our past accomplishments and provides us with a clear path into the future."

A key part of this path is the concept and execution of quality.

Quality surfaces repeatedly in the Strategic Plan, where it's called "one of our basic responsibilities" and a "core process." In the plan, Williams called quality based policies and processes "a cornerstone of high-performing organizations."

Under the Policies and Procedures section of the plan's Strategic Approach, reshaping quality is its own strategic initiative: "Develop a plan to effectively rebuild and execute our quality assurance capabilities through improved policies, processes and tools."

Much has been done since the plan formalized the agency's goal to raise the level of the DCMA quality assurance program.

These efforts have coalesced around the Quality Assurance Directorate and its four strategic initiatives: achieve operational excellence which inspires warfighter confidence in the QA services provided by DCMA; execute leadership which

influences industrial base performance; revitalize and transform the workforce to optimize performance; and develop and sustain a superior competitive position in providing QA support throughout the Department of Defense acquisition system.

The new QA Directorate was created to build what Executive Director Michael Shields calls an expanding "community of practice." This community is comprised of the agency's quality workforce, senior managers at the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, the defense industrial base and agency customers.

Several initiatives have already begun to build on this concept. An agency Quality Council has been established, and QA senior management has become active participants on existing Corporate Management Councils. Through the directorate, the agency is working with industry associations such as the Aerospace Industries Association and Nadcap. QA is also participating on commercial standards body technical committees, including SAE G19 and G21, helping develop enhanced risk mitigation requirements for reducing the likelihood of counterfeit items entering the supply system.

Shields said the QA program is in a transitional period as it refocuses emphasis from activities of quality control inspection toward those of quality assurance prevention, which provide more meaningful acquisition insight to customers. "This is a paradigm shift for many of our employees, and we have to give them the information and tools they need to understand our direction."

Though the directorate is located at the agency's Fort Lee, Va., headquarters, the community includes about 3,000 quality engineers and specialists – nearly 30 percent of the agency's workforce – functionally aligned to QA but spread across all contract management offices and regions.

Policy Driving Change

Since the directorate was created, careful attention has been given to policies, tools and training that move toward using data analysis and surveillance tools to maximize the effectiveness of the workforce.

Dwayne Bennett, QA Process

improving policies, processes and tools

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— Michael Shields, Defense Contract Management Agency Quality Assurance executive director

The Defense Contract Management Agency’s Quality Assurance Directorate is taking the lead on creating one surveillance tool for use across the agency. Allison Elgaard, Information Technology Customer Service Organization contractor, facilitates discussion during the Enterprise Surveillance Plan Integrated Product Team meeting near Fort Lee, Va., Feb. 28. (Photo by Patrick Tremblay, DCMA Public Affairs)

Management Division director, said being new has given the directorate a unique opportunity. “Time can be taken to review policies, and we can draw on the experience of field personnel to adjust things and make them easier for our customers to understand and execute.” Bennett said a great deal of research goes into ensuring a policy stands alone for a given process, and interdependencies between processes and systems are respected. “I fully expect the agency’s overall policy program will continue to evolve and QA policy will evolve along with it.”

While the agency has always had people on contractor shop floors, there has traditionally been what Shields calls a culture of inspection. “We’re now moving beyond just inspecting parts,” he said. “The inspection function we perform now needs to be an inspection of the contractors’ controls.”

Gary Wegrzynowicz, QA deputy executive director, said the goal is to move

oversight “up the production line” to help identify problems before they occur or become systemic.

“Discovering a nonconformance during final inspection is too late,” said Wegrzynowicz. “Ideally, reviewing the contractor’s processes during production, and assuring that those processes are in control, will lead to fewer issues with the final product.”

Processes

“We’ve created nearly 30 policies in the past three years,” said Shields. These policies are supported by new eTools and changes in training, all shaping the processes QA employees should now be executing. These include the three primary methods of surveillance – system, process and product. While each is important, Shields said increased scrutiny and analysis of contractor data and targeted training is leading to a more effective agency workforce.

Recent issues with counterfeit electronic parts caught QA’s attention, said Chris Brust, QA Engineering Division director. “Congress and OSD have grave concerns about counterfeit parts entering the defense supply chain. QA is working with the OSD Anti-Counterfeit Working Group to propose new regulations be added to the DFARS later this year.” DFARS is the Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement.

Brust said the regulations will require contractor compliance as well as the reporting, tracking and destruction of counterfeit electronic parts. A new checklist tool is being finalized to assist QA specialists in developing surveillance plans to verify the effectiveness of contractors’ counterfeit part prevention processes and controls.

Tools and Training

“The process of refocusing the QA workforce oversight from inspections of

product to contractor controls will require new tools that will enable our workforce to succeed,” said Glenn Seabridge, QA Information Management Division director.

Launched in March 2010, the Supplier Risk System 2.0 is an example of an eTool designed to enhance the effectiveness of the workforce. SRS provides information to assist in identifying the likelihood of contractor non-compliance, helping employees prioritize surveillance activities. Its reporting capabilities let leadership assess risk indicators for industrial sector or weapon systems from the contract management office level upwards.

The system is continually being enhanced, assisted by feedback from the field. Seabridge’s division leads the effort in producing these tools, and also working with other directorates in developing enterprise tools to optimize agency effectiveness.

According to Seabridge, some previous tools were designed for a single function and do not meet emerging needs.

“Today all functional areas provide insight of contractor controls, giving us a more robust picture of contractor capabilities and challenges. To meet the workforce needs we have fielded some new enterprise tools.”

Seabridge said Corrective Action Request 1.0 is a good example. The CAR eTool documents, tracks and helps analyze contractor deficiencies and their response and corrections. Another tool, Delegation 1.0, ensures delegations are properly flowed from prime contractor to sub-tier contractor, providing oversight at all levels. “These tools were initially designed to serve only the QA community,” said Seabridge, “but have been enhanced and now also serve other communities such as property, Earned Value Management and more.”

Next generation CAR and delegation tools are in development. Other enterprise tools are also in the works, including Training Competency Assessment, First Line Supervisor Review, Corrective Action Plan and an innovative surveillance tool that Seabridge said “will meet a majority of risk assessment, surveillance

planning and surveillance execution needs across the agency.”

Communicating Change

To help ensure that this evolution of quality is meeting agency and customer needs, senior quality leaders from the headquarters’ directorate, regions and operational directorates have formed a Quality Council. The council discusses enterprise level quality issues, and provides broad input on changes affecting how employees do their jobs.

Innovative initiatives are being employed to communicate these changes – a challenge with a geographically dispersed workforce, many of whom are more likely to be on the move than at a static workstation.

Regional quality-specific meetings are one way the Quality Council is bringing the evolving vision of DCMA quality directly to the field.

“The council held its first regional informational meeting in late January,” said Marcus Berry, QA Resource Management Division director. Shields, Wegrzynowicz, QA division directors and QA managers from the agency’s Operations Directorate and Eastern Region spent a week in

Boston at the regional headquarters, highlighted by an informational meeting.

Twelve contract management offices participated in the meeting by video teleconference or online through eConnect. The management team provided an overview of various QA initiatives currently underway, and participants were asked for feedback on the program and ideas to make the program better.

“It was a great opportunity for people within the QA community to provide feedback and have frank discussions about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the agency’s QA program,” said Shields.

Similar visits are planned for the Western and Central regions later this year.

Berry said he and other division directors will also be traveling to select areas with high concentration of DCMA activity, like Springfield, N.J. and Orlando, Fla., to conduct smaller scale presentations and question and answer sessions.

The 2009 Strategic Plan formalized the need for DCMA to improve policies, processes and tools to rebuild the agency’s quality assurance capabilities. This strategic initiative and the agency’s vision to be “DoD’s leading experts in quality assurance” have guided the QA Directorate for the past three years.

In the end, it’s all about one word – quality – the essential modifier to the agency’s mission “to ensure delivery of quality products and services to the warfighter.” 



Gary Wegrzynowicz, Defense Contract Management Agency’s Quality Assurance Directorate deputy executive director, said moving oversight “up the production line” will help identify problems before they occur or become systemic. “Ideally, reviewing the contractor’s processes during production, and assuring that those processes are in control, will lead to fewer issues with the final product.” (Photo by Patrick Tremblay, DCMA Public Affairs)