

Quality Management Friction

The natural evolution of quality management processes in home building companies includes a period of friction between the “system” and the “field”. Criticism from construction typically includes comments that the quality inspector is inconsistent, too picky, and makes personal attacks. Inspectors counter that construction cares only about budgets and schedules or that they let known problems slide over to warranty to avoid extra work.

Interestingly, if the quality inspector and the superintendent traded places, the exact same complaints would be heard. Certainly arrogant or condescending attitudes can exacerbate the debates, but friction is an inevitable part of the quality management process, especially during the early years of implementation.

The main cause of arguing is that a complete and objective definition of quality eludes home builders. While some standards can be expressed in measurements that avoid debate (a 1/4 inch is the same whether you are a superintendent, quality inspector, sales person, or home buyer), many are open to subjective evaluation: carpet seams, paint coverage, drywall flaws, and so on.

In addition, quality details not previously specified are often noted during quality inspections. For example, in one organization a debate raged between construction and quality personnel over the rough bottom edge of a marble shelf on the side of a shower enclosure. Construction’s position was “It’s the same as the model” while the quality inspector felt it should be smooth to prevent injury to someone cleaning it.

In the end, the model and the home that caused the debate were both corrected. Specifications were updated for future construction. This small but potentially significant detail had simply not been addressed previously. The heated debate was an unnecessary waste of time and energy. An efficient and reasonable approach would have been for all involved parties to visit the model and the home in question together, examining the marble edge and arriving at a consensus.

This incident illustrates several key points about quality management friction.

These discussions should be expected and managed systematically, including mutual respect for all parties. Recognize quality debates for what they are: a natural and inevitable part of the quality management evolution. Naming this process provides a needed perspective for all involved and tends to reduce unhealthy and potential damaging emotionality (such as people taking the debate personally).

Quality issues cannot be resolved sitting around a conference table, standing in the construction trailer, or talking on the phone. Homes must be walked and walked *together* to avoid anyone overlooking or misunderstanding the original concern.

All parties should limit themselves to specifics. Generalizations such as “Those quality guys are too picky” or “They are inconsistent” solve nothing. Similarly, quality staff should avoid implying that construction only cares about schedules or budgets.

If necessary, the company owner or upper management should cast the tie breaking vote. Once codes and other requirements are met, upper management is the next authority on what the company’s product quality will be. Even members of upper management may disagree about how a detail should be handled, further reinforcing the observation that no completely objective definition of quality exists.

Once a new detail is decided, it needs to be documented. This might include the trades' scopes of work, quality checklists, or warranty guidelines and from that point forward, all parties will abide by the new standard.

Because a condition appears in a model does not mean it is the quality you should deliver. Likewise, because a detail meets code does not mean it will meet company or buyer requirements. Similarly, "The building department passed it" is not a defense; having a certificate of occupancy guarantees nothing. That a municipality could miss something during an inspection is *not* hard to believe; it happens all the time.

In some cases, the construction side of the debate will prevail and in others quality prevails. Some details come down to a matter of money, others time; some come down to what the competition is doing or how often warranty runs into conflict with homeowners on the subject. Automatic answers do not exist—each detail must be judged on a case-by-case basis.

Develop a clear vision of company quality and align everyone's mind with that vision. Walking homes in small groups to arrive at a consensus regarding quality details—especially when a new community first opens—can head off some of these clashes. This also provides practice that makes resolving quality debates easier in later months. Involve as many people as possible from a particular product line. This may include trade personnel in some cases.

Trade places. Another approach to easing tensions is to rotate personnel through both positions as part of an internship program. When the proverbial shoe is on the other foot, it feels different. Good natured debate is then easier on everyone.