THE 7

SINS
OF MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

JUST THE FACTS

When establishing a standardized management system such as ISO 9001, various criticisms, problems and risks may arise.

The authors parallel seven risks of implementing a standardized management system with the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust.

They also present seven virtues and how they can protect you from these inherent risks when implementing a management system.
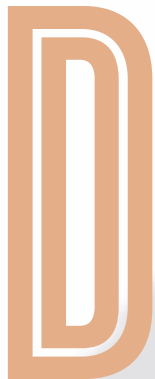
Beware the risks and pitfalls of implementing a management system by Martí Casadesús, Luca Mastrogiacomo and Fiorenzo Franceschini

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D espite the changes introduced in the different standardized management systems (MS) since the launch of ISO 9001 in 1987, there still are various criticisms, problems and risks—unfounded or not—associated with them.

If the seven cardinal sins of Christian teachings serve to categorize the main sinful human behaviors and habits, couldn't they also organize the main temptations or risks of implementing a standardized MS? This article raises seven questions that continue to generate debate among academics and practitioners.

The fact that the number of deadly sins is seven is fitting with quality management. According to Pythagoras and the Bible itself, the number seven symbolizes the perfection of the universe—there are seven days in a week and seven days in each lunar phase, for example. Nothing could be more apt to the pursuit of quality than the concept of the pursuit of perfection.

Along the same line, there are seven aspects as fundamental as Kaoru Ishikawa's basic quality tools, the seven advanced tools for quality management and, even more relevant, the seven principles of quality management described in ISO 9000.[1]

The seven sins

The seven sins or risks of implementing a standardized MS are:

1. Pride

External MS certification by a third party is a recognition of the quality of the system implemented in an organization and certainly is a source of pride for all those who achieve it, creating a source of publicity for organizations, suppliers and society in general. Due to the pride generated, however, there is a risk of using this recognition as a marketing tool rather than an MS for continuous improvement.

First, an organization's motivations to certify according to any standardized MS must be considered. There is abundant research on this subject, but it was detected early that the main reasons for seeking certification can be associated with marketing.[2] This motivation generally is among the findings of all studies on this matter, although it is true that it is gradually losing importance vis-à-vis improving product and service quality.

Pride in terms of the certifications obtained is not accidental, as illustrated by the very definition of the objectives of ISO 9001, which specifically state: "... an organization needs to demonstrate its ability to consistently provide products and services that meet customer and applicable statutory and regulatory requirements ..."[3]

Likewise, no matter how proud the organization feels, MS certification should not become a golden cage used to show society the organization's beatitudes. Showing society the quality of the implemented MS should be a derivative of the process as a whole, not its main goal.

2. Envy

One of the seven main pillars of implementing a standardized MS is the process approach, which involves defining the characteristics and tasks of each process. A deficient assignment of responsibilities in the MS, linked to each worker's sense of possession of

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his or her responsibilities and envy with respect to those of others, leads to a completely inefficient MS.

Among many others, Gavin Dick and Patricia Siltori evidenced that proper process management is one of the main benefits of implementing an MS.[4, 5] An incorrect definition of responsibilities in MS design can lead to improper functioning of the organization because:

1. They are not assigned to those with the competencies to carry them out.
2. They are not assigned to any person or department in the organization.
3. They are assigned to different people or entities, and often no one feels entirely responsible for them.

These possible scenarios are exacerbated further when the sin of envy emerges in the strict sense of the Latin word *invidere*, or "to look too closely" at the responsibilities of others to ensure they don't invade their own, with the risk that there will be some responsibilities that no one takes on. It also must be considered, however, that envy is an inherent virtue of the MS itself. There is an important component of vigilant envy involved in maintaining the MS's equality and functioning.
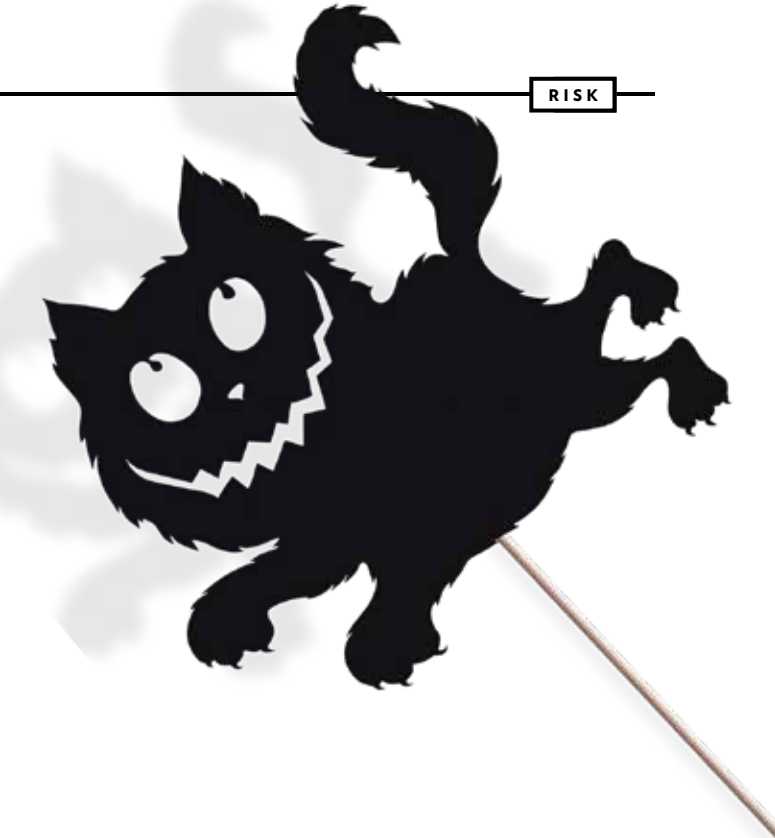
3. Wrath

Undoubtedly, one of the main criticisms of standardized MSs in general is the increased bureaucracy, which sometimes leads to feelings of wrath.

Tasks such as defining and implementing the quality policy, internal and external audits, and risk analysis, for example, and the increasing amount of documentation required to complete these tasks according to the standard often are perceived as not contributing to the quality of the product offered, and therefore adding no value to it.

In the literature, there are many cases in which opposing views emerge. Some authors observed how the increase in bureaucracy is one of the main disadvantages of the quality management system (QMS) while, in contrast, others found how the documentation system potentially serves the organization's needs without leading to bureaucracy. What seems obvious is that bureaucratization depends directly on implementation, which can be quite different even in similar organizations.

Notably, wrath is not a result of the bureaucracy itself, but of the feeling that there is no justice in its application. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri defined wrath from one's own love and respect for justice as, "The love that someone feels for justice that, nevertheless, perverts him into a desire for revenge and resentment."[6] It is the misinterpretation of MS implementations, which do not add

real value to the system, that are truly responsible for this recognized perception of wrath.

4. Sloth

Performing tasks in an organization through standardized procedures ensures they always are performed uniformly. This also is one of the main risks of MSs, however, given that there is the trap of not adapting them to avoid the tedious task of introducing modifications. In other words, the MS reduces the organization's capacity to innovate. May this be a matter of sloth?

Clearly, the tradeoff between innovation and standardization has been the focus of ongoing debate on QMSs and standardized MSs in general. Regarding QMSs, multiple authors agree with Dick's statement: "QM methodologies and tools, especially QMS standards such as ISO 9001, which are based on systematization and formalization, hinder innovation because of their tendency to increase bureaucracy."[7]

In contrast, other authors showed how implementing a QMS has a positive effect on innovation. These contradictions also are detected when the ability of certified organizations to innovate in new products is researched.

Returning to *The Divine Comedy*, Alighieri said the lazy "never truly lived." In consequence, those who do not engage in any kind of obligation are bound for all eternity to pursue a cause that is unknown even to themselves. In this regard, the International Organization for Standardization already has positioned itself to ensure that an adequate implementation of the standardized MS allows the necessary innovation capacity in each organization. The approval of an additional standard, *ISO 56002:2019—Innovation management—innovation management system—guidance*, adds to this effect.

5. Greed

Undoubtedly, one of the biggest risks involved in a standardized MS is it becoming a victim of the greed of all those involved in its implementation—such as advisors and quality managers—who may design or implement an MS away from the organization's needs.

In a pioneering way at the beginning of the ISO 9000 phenomena, John Seddon announced this problem when he stated that "the standard relies too much on people and, in particular, on assessors' interpretation of quality."[8] He considered that implantations of the standard are influenced by the background of the external assessors, who generally don't know the most about the organization. This can lead to a soft implementation that meets the standard but isn't exactly what the organization needs.

To purge this sin, Alighieri laid the greedy prone on the ground, immobile with their eyes fixed on earthly things without being able to look up. The obligation to take a closer look at the requirements probably would help align MSs with their specific needs.

6. Gluttony

Focusing on quality assurance through the implementation of standardized MSs, a major risk linked to gluttony that must be anticipated and considered is the danger of an MS swallowing up everything it considers feasible to standardize. In other words, an excessive appetite for standardizing everything.

First, it must be borne in mind that it is impossible to define an MS without including policies, procedures and instructions, for example. Multiple implementations and many different strategies can be found, however, which if wrongly implemented, can lead to an excessive need for standardization. The MS itself may end up displaying gluttony, requiring more processes to standardize, more indicators to analyze and more goals to meet.

In *The Divine Comedy*, those condemned for committing gluttony are punished by being left out in cold rain, beaten with hail and deafened by the terrible Cerberus. That is, they are condemned for over-satisfying their infinite and foolish hunger. Back to QMSs, the same continuous improvement procedures set out in ISO 9001:2015, clause 10 can serve to avoid condemnation of this kind. Otherwise, the standard would lead organizations to an exhaustive and inoperative standardization contrary to its own principles.

7. Lust

After a successful start with ISO 9001 or ISO 14001, many organizations continue to advance in the standardization and integration of other MSs linked to different objectives (such as ISO 26001 and ISO 27001). However, this effect probably has led to a double glut: organizations implementing standards that they may not need, and standardizing entities designing tools of little applicability.

In the first case, we only must consider the organizations that have certified environmental MSs according to ISO 14001 when their environmental impact was much lower. How many organizations implemented this standard to improve their MS, or just for marketing reasons?

Add to this the role of standardization bodies, whose activity also may fall into the same classification of cardinal sin. ISO 20700, for example, provides guidelines for

effectively delivering management consultancy services. There are no data available on this, but how many organizations have implemented or used it?

Surely there is a need for reflection on both sides to avoid lust. In *The Divine Comedy*, the process of purgatory for sinners included forcing them to stand between two trees so they couldn't eat the fruit of either tree, so they starved. Surely, they should be allowed to eat just the fruits they need, thus avoiding indigestion.

The seven virtues

In the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas listed the seven deadly sins, but even before that, the Catholic Church had described the opposite of these sins: the seven virtues. With practice, these virtues can protect you from the temptation of the seven sins.

1. **From pride (recognition only as a marketing tool) to humility.** To counteract pride, organizations must work with humility. To do so, they should be proud of the certifications they get from the MS but be aware their system can always be improved.

2. **From envy (deficient assignment of responsibilities) to benevolence.** The weapons to combat the envy that is generated in the definition of responsibilities are kindness and benevolence—having goodwill or sympathy toward colleagues and their tasks.

3. **From wrath (increasing bureaucracy) to patience.** Wrath only can be countered with patience—the attitude to overcome any setbacks and difficulties. Any new standardized MS implementation or improvement brings change. Communicating with people, promoting collaboration and empowering people are crucial to counteract this sin.

4. **From sloth (reducing the capacity to innovate) to diligence.** Diligence is the virtue related to the temptation of sloth. Its Latin origin, meaning "take care," reflects the need to be careful with the actions carried out regarding implementing and continuously improving the MS. The MS must be a flexible system oriented toward continuous improvement and ensuring the introduction of all necessary innovations, including incremental ones.

5. **From greed (MS away from the needs of the organization) to generosity.** An excess of greed must be compensated for by overwhelming generosity. That is, helping and giving what you have to others without expecting anything in return. Standardized MSs must be implemented with the collaboration and involvement of all the actors. A strong dose of generosity on everyone's part is mandatory.

6. **From gluttony (standardization of everything) to temperance.** To counteract gluttony, there is nothing better than temperance—moderation in the attractiveness of processes, checking whether a specific procedure, instruction or indicator is worth implementing, and balance between the already-implemented ones.

7. **From lust (designing and implementing standards that aren't needed) to purity.** The virtue that sits opposite the cardinal sin of lust is purity. The disproportionate profiling of standards to be met when they may be unnecessary or irrelevant, which is why it is necessary to focus on those that are relevant to each organization and environment and to integrate them into a single MS that avoids duplication.

MSs must ensure the highest quality in the least-intrusive way. Keep in mind, however, that an imbalance caused by an excess of virtue can likewise become a sin: Too much humility can cause pusillanimity. Likewise, an excess of laxity when implementing a standardized MS also can result in a fatal error: having a useless system.

Regardless of the validity of the idea of sins nowadays, they point to seven intrinsic passions of the human psyche. Is it possible to imagine a human being without these? Would these standardized MSs be better off if they didn't have these inherent risks? **QP**

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