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THE SEVEN SINS OF STANDARDIZED MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (MS)

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1. Introduction

Despite the changes introduced in the different standardized Management Systems (MS) since the launch of the first version of ISO 9001 in 1987, there are still various criticisms, problems and risks, unfounded or not, associated with them. If the definition of seven cardinal sins of the Catholic Christian serves to group and categorize the main sinful human behaviours and habits, could they not also serve to set out and organise the main temptations or risks of implementing a standardized MS?. This article reflects on this fact, using a parallel with the 7 capital sins teachings by raising 7 questions that continue to generate debate among academics and practitioners.

Notably, the fact that the number of deadly sins is exactly seven is entirely fitting with quality management. According to Pythagoras and the Bible itself, the number seven symbolises the perfection of the universe: the number of days of the week is seven, there are seven days in each lunar phase, Nothing could be more apt to the pursuit of quality than the concept of the pursuit of perfection. In the same line there are seven aspects as fundamental as the basic quality tools of Ishikawa, the seven advanced tools for quality management, and even more relevant in terms of this article, the seven principles of quality management described in ISO 9000 (ISO, 2015a).

2. The seven sins, the seven risks

2.1. Pride

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

First, an organisation's motivations to certify according to any standardized MS must be considered. There is abundant research on this subject but already in one of the first, carried out by Rayner and Porter (1991), it was detected that the main reasons for seeking certification are associated with marketing. This motivation is a generally among the finding of all studies on this matter, although it is true that it is gradually losing importance vis-à-vis improving the quality of products and services.

Pride in terms of the certifications obtained is not accidental, as illustrated by the very definition of the objectives of the ISO 9001 standard, which specifically states: “(...) *an organization needs to demonstrate its ability to consistently provide products and services that meet customer and applicable statutory and regulatory requirements, (...)*” (ISO, 2015b). Likewise, no matter how proud the organisation feels, the certification of an MS should not end up becoming a golden cage used to show society the beatitudes of the organization. Showing society, the quality of the implemented MS should be a derivative of the process as a whole, not its main goal.

2.2 Envy

One of the seven main pillars of the implementation of a standardized MS (see ISO, 2015a) is the “process approach”. Defining the characteristics and tasks of each process need to be defined. A **deficient assignment of responsibilities in the MS**, linked to each worker’s sense of possession of their responsibilities and envy with respect to those of others, leads to a completely inefficient MS.

Among many others, Dick (2000) and Siltori et al. (2021) evidenced that the proper management of processes is one of the main benefits of MS’ implementation. An incorrect definition of responsibilities in MS design can lead to improper functioning of the organization: First, because they are not assigned to those with the competencies to carry them out; second, because they are not assigned to any particular person or organ in the organization; and third, because they are assigned to different people or entities and often no one feels entirely responsible for them.

These possible scenarios are further exacerbated 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 that they do not invade their own, with the risk that there will be some responsibilities that no one ends up taking on. However, it must also be considered that envy is an inherent virtue of the MS itself: there is an important component of vigilant envy involved in maintaining the equality and functioning of the MS.

2.3 Wrath

Undoubtedly one of the main criticisms of standardized MS in general is the **increasing bureaucratization** involved, which sometimes leads to a feeling of wrath vis-à-vis everything to do with MS.

Tasks such as defining and implementing the Quality Policy, internal and external audits, risk analysis, and so on, and the increasing amount of documentation required to do so according to the standard (see Clause 4 in ISO, 2015b), are often perceived as making no contribution to the quality of the product offered, and therefore adding no value to it.

In the literature there are many cases where opposing views emerge. Some authors observe how the increase in bureaucracy is one of the main disadvantages of the QMS while, in contrast, others find 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 defines 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."* It is the misinterpretation of implementations of MS that do not add real value to the system, that are truly responsible for this recognized perception of wrath.

2.4 Sloth

The performance of tasks in an organization through standardized procedures ensures that they are always carried out in a uniform way. However, this fact is also one of the main risks of MS, 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?

It is clear that the trade-off between innovation and standardization has been the focus of ongoing debate on QMS and standardized MS in general. Regarding QMS, multiples authors agree with Dick's (2000) statement: *"QM methodologies and tools, especially QMS standards such as ISO 9001, which are based on systematisation and formalization, hinder innovation because of their tendency to increase bureaucracy"*. However, in contrast, other authors show how the implementation of a QMS has a positive effect on innovation. These contradictions are also detected when the ability of certified organizations to innovate in new products is researched.

Returning to Divine Comedy, the writer considered that the lazy "never truly lived". In consequence, those who do not engage in any kind of obligation are bound by all eternity to pursue a cause that is unknown even to themselves. In this regard, ISO has already positioned itself, not only in ensuring that an adequate implementation of the standardized MS allows the necessary innovation capacity in each organization, but also in the approval of an additional standard, "ISO 56002:2019: Innovation Management System-Guidance".

2.5 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: advisors, quality managers, and so on, who may **design and/or implement an MS away from the organizational needs of the organization**.

In a very pioneering way at the beginning of the "ISO 9000 phenomena", Seddon (1997) announced this problem when he stated that *"the standard relies too much on people and, in particular, on assessors' interpretation of quality"*. He considered that implantations of the standard are influenced by the background of the external assessors, who are generally not the ones that know most about the organization. This can lead to a "soft" implementation that meets the standard, but which is not exactly what the organization needs.

To purge this sin, Dante laid the greedy prone on the ground, immobile and keeping their eyes fixed on earthly things without being able to look up. The obligation to take a closer

look at the requirements would probably help to have MS more aligned with their specific needs.

2.6 Gluttony

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

First, it must be borne in mind that it is impossible to define an MS without including policies, procedures, instructions, etc. However, multiple implementations and many different strategies can be found 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 analyse, more goals to meet, and so on.

In the Divine Comedy, those condemned for committing the sin of "gluttony" are punished by being left out in very cold rain, beaten with hail and deafened by the terrible Cerberus. That is, they are condemned for oversatisfying their infinite and foolish hunger. Back to QMS, the same continuous improvement procedures set out in Clause 10 of ISO 9001:2015, Improving the QMS (ISO, 2015b), can be expected to serve to avoid condemnation of this kind, otherwise the standard would lead organizations to an exhaustive and inoperative standardization contrary to its own principles.

2.7 Lust

After a successful start with ISO 9001 or ISO 14001, many organizations have continued to advance in the standardization and integration of other MS linked to different objectives (ISO 26001, ISO 27001, etc.). However, this effect has probably led to a double glut: organisations' **implementation of standards that they may not need**, and **standardizing entities' design of tools of little applicability**.

In the first case we only have to consider the organizations that have certified EMS according to ISO 14001 when their environmental impact was much lower. How many companies implemented this specific standard to improve their management system or just for marketing reasons?

And to this aspect must be added the role of standardization bodies, whose activity may also fall into the same classification of cardinal sin. One example could be ISO 20700, which provides guidelines for the effective delivery of management consultancy services. There are no data available on this, but how many companies must 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 that they would not be able to eat the fruit of either of them, thus ending up starving. Surely, they should just be allowed to just eat the fruits they need, thus avoiding indigestion?

3. The seven virtues to counteract the sins

In the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquino listed the seven deadly sins but, even before that, the Catholic Church had already described the opposite of these sin: the seven virtues, which with their practice would protect from the temptation of the seven sins committed.

From Pride (recognition only as a marketing tool) to Humility

To counteract **Pride**, organizations need to work with **Humility**. To do so, they should be proud of the certifications they get from the MS, but in awareness that their system can always be improved.

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 good will or sympathy towards colleagues and their tasks.

From Wrath (increasing of the bureaucratization) to Patience

One can only counter **Wrath** with **Patience**: the attitude to overcome any setbacks and difficulties. Any new standardized MS implementation, or improvement of the current one, brings about changes. Communicating with people, promoting collaboration, empowering people, and so on are crucial to counteract this sin.

From Diligence (reducing the capacity to innovate) to Sloth

Diligence is the virtue vis-à-vis the temptation of **Sloth**. Its Latin origin, meaning "take care", reflects the need to be careful with the actions carried out regarding the implementation and continuous improvement of MS. The MS must be a very flexible system, oriented towards continuous improvement, and ensuring the introduction of all necessary innovations, including incremental ones.

From Greed (MS away from the needs of the organization) to Generosity

An excess of **Greed** must be compensated by overwhelming **Generosity**; that is, helping and giving what one has to others without expecting anything in return. Standardized MS must be implemented with the collaboration and involvement of all the actors: a strong dose of generosity on everyone's part is mandatory.

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.

From Lust (designing and implementing standards not 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.

MS must ensure the highest quality at the least intrusive way. However, it should be borne in mind 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 in the implementation of a standardized MS can also be a fatal error: having a useless system.

Regardless of the validity or not of the idea of sins nowadays, they point to seven intrinsic passions of the human psyche. Is it possible to image a human being without these? Then, would these standardized MS be better off if they did not have these inherent risks?

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