BMS is ISO-Certified – Who Cares?

"Blow Molded Specialties is an ISO-certified company" sounds very dry and formal, so we decided to share what it actually means to the people at BMS. So a bunch of us – Tom Boyd (President), Antonio Soares (Quality Manager and Production Manager), Sarah Cook (Marketing Manager), and Avril Cook (Comptroller) – got together and had a conversation about ISO and BMS: the good, the bad and the ugly.

We've distilled that rather passionate hour-long conversation into a series of questions and answers that represent why ISO is so important to us, and why it should matter to you as well.

What does ISO mean to BMS?

At its core, ISO is a series of steps that we create and then commit to.

ISO certification basically assures that we have effective systems in place helping us to produce the same quality of goods all the time, every time. So even though we have superstars working at all levels, from management to engineering to quality control, we set up our company so that ordinary people can reliably produce extraordinary results. And if one of those superstars wins the lottery and retires to Fiji, we'll still produce that same quality of goods.

Nor is consistent quality achieved by back-breaking effort. Our employees aren't working 60-hour weeks getting blow molded parts out the door. That's just not sustainable.

The step-by-step, detailed processes and procedures that we developed and keep improving are the real superstars. They allow us all to just be our normal, dillligent yet imperfect selves and still deliver quality parts on time and on budget. Continually improving is all part of the ISO certification process.

Of course, creativity is important to process development, but it doesn't have a home in the production end of our business. Once we've used craft and art to develop processes and capabilities, we take them out of the realm of inspiration and genius and make them repeatable by anyone with the proper training and skills.

What did it take to become ISO certified? Why did you do it?

We knew that getting certified was going to be a pain in the butt. And it was. Incredibly time-consuming. Really expensive, like $25,000 in fees and audits and consultants. But we knew it was going to make our company stronger and allow us to deliver better products to our customers.

ISO requires documentation of all procedures around the manufacturing, storing, testing, and shipping of products. It's not enough to make perfect bellows, for example – we also have to be able to track each bellows into a box, onto a pallet, and then onto a truck. So if a customer does call with a problem we can identify the exact batch and pull samples of finished product and raw material to figure out what went wrong.

We gave all the processes and procedures we wrote to an ISO auditor, who looked at our business along with these documents so thoroughly to ensure that any properly trained employee could follow them without error. That included procedures like the calibration of instruments.

So every instrument we use in Quality Control to check the dimensions, weight, or flexibility of a blow molded part must be calibrated on a regular basis, according to a very exact process. Without that process, we might be passing parts that actually don't meet specifications because the instrument is giving faulty readings. Like when your bathroom scale suddenly shows you five pounds heavier –instrument error is unacceptable!

How do you remain ISO certified?

Getting certified is like winning the World Series – we celebrate for about half an hour, and then we're back to work, preparing for our next audit. To stay ISO certified, you need to pass one audit per year but we don't just think of them as ISO audits anymore. Now they're just "Is our company as good as it can be?" sessions.

Because our business is always changing, the processes and procedures need to change as well. When we take on a new client, start a new run, or procure a new machine, we need to incorporate those changes into our overall quality system.

At this point, ISO is like eating bran cereal. We did it at first because it was good for us, but by now we've developed quite a taste for it.

Who is your auditor?

Our auditor is one of the reasons we "enjoy" the audits. He's a Santa Claus look alike, complete with the beard, and he's a fabulous teacher and storyteller. He used to work as an engineer for DuPont, and now travels around the world peaking under the hoods of hundreds of ISO-certified businesses every year. He's very strict with us, so we always see improvements after his audits.

How does ISO influence the culture of BMS?

ISO – or rather the philosophy of continuous process improvement – is really in our DNA now. We don't even think in terms of ISO anymore, just quality improvement.

ISO comes with a couple of wonderful bits of philosophy:

1. There's always a way to do it better.
2. When something goes wrong, the fault usually lies with the system, not with individuals.

This second point really empowers our employees to speak up when if they spot problems, because we're never looking to blame people. Instead of "Who screwed up?", we're asking, "What broke down in our system and what can we change so it doesn't happen again?"

So instead of people protecting their backsides or keeping quiet for fear of upsetting the apple cart, we have a proactive culture in which everyone is looking for things that aren't perfect yet so we can brainstorm solutions together. ISO certification makes it easy to reward, rather than shoot the messenger.

How do you communicate this culture of quality to your employees?

Every conversation we have about our work is about quality. You can't work at BMS for long without getting the idea that it's all work in progress, and it can all be improved, and the most valued team members are the ones always looking for those opportunities.

And we all know to tie quality to the big question: "How does this serve our customer." Quality in manufacturing doesn't mean a thing unless it's tied to the big business goal of serving the customer as well as possible.

Beyond that, we've spent a lot of time turning the ISO documentation into visuals that are posted next to workstations. The steps are of no use if they're buried on page 371 of some manual on a shelf in the Quality Manager's office.

Our goal is to make the ISO procedures more like traffic signs than line items in the tax code, so that the person on third shift at two in the morning could find the answer to a question through the ISO system we've put into place.

Employees put themselves on the line by initialing every box of product. They're literally saying, I take responsibility for the quality of this output. The pride they feel in their work makes them pay close attention to the quality of every run.

We also play Quality Games. By "games," we mean that quite literally. We determine an ambitious goal (say, around safety or machine down time) and work together to achieve it. We post the daily and weekly scores in the break room for everyone to see, and we reward ourselves with prizes when we achieve the goal.

One of our most successful games was our very first one, focused on self-induced contamination. Early on, we were scrapping self-contaminated blow molded parts with all sorts of crazy stuff. We found things like cell phones, jewelry, and candy wrappers in product before putting parts in boxes.

These carelessly stored personal items were not only messing up the plastic parts and causing down time, in some cases they were actually destroying expensive machine parts.

So rather than just send out a memo telling everyone how sloppy they were being and how it had to stop, we made the turnaround into a game. We set a goal of zero incidents of self-contamination within 6 months. We achieved that goal half-way through the game, and stayed there for several years.

While we get occasional flare-ups of that problem, usually when new people join us, it doesn't take long for our culture of quality to kick in and educate the newcomers. The old rule of thumb seems to apply – it takes 21 days for someone to develop a new habit.

How does ISO fit in with your management philosophy?

Instead of the workers being forced to change because of a lecture from management, they were the ones coming up with rules, procedures, and ideas to eliminate self-induced contamination. That kind of energy is so much more effective than top-down command and control.

The idea of a game comes from Open Book Management, a philosophy and methodology that we live as fully as we can. Basically, we believe that the more our employees understand the big picture, the more strategically and fully they can contribute to it. So we share how the goal of the game ties in with the overall financial health of the company upon which all our livelihoods depend.

We've benefited so much from Open Book Management and games that we're actually investigating becoming an employee-owned company. Nobody in management here is crazy enough to think we have all the answers, or that we should be the only ones to share in the rewards of consistent jobs well done.

Doing things as well as we can is everyone's responsibility at BMS, and the systems we've set up make it easy and important for all hands on deck to blow whistles if they see problems and lead the effort to find solutions.

Spend a week with us and you'll be amazed at how many meetings we have. Every time something doesn't work perfectly, we shut down production and gather to figure out what went wrong, how to fix it quickly, and how to introduce a new procedure to keep it from happening again.

By halting production so quickly, we keep costs down for our customers and avoid shipping products that don't meet specifications. So while perhaps our customers would like to believe that everything we do is perfect because the end product they receive is always up to spec, the truth is that we'll never achieve absolute perfection. All we can do is keep striving for it.

What's the biggest difference between an ISO and non-ISO facility?

The biggest difference we've seen is in our willingness – heck, our eagerness – to know the truth and not sweep anything under the rug. When a problem means there's going to be an unpleasant scene and somebody's going to get blamed, most people try really hard NOT to see problems.

But when everyone gets energized by problems, because they've been trained to see them as opportunities to get even better, then it's easy and rewarding to notice all the areas of imperfection and work to turn them around.

A couple of us audited an injection molding site recently. They weren't ISO certified, and they weren't into quality improvement. The visit was an eye-opener for us. While the entryway was very nice, we were shocked at the mess and sloppiness in the back. The factory floor and the back offices were in total disarray and disrepair.

It was disgusting. I mean, there were big gaps in the floor. They had three or four different layers of flooring that were ripped up with holes in between so we were trying to walk around on the floor trying not to fall down around machines, squeezing through little spaces. There were piles of paper everywhere in the offices.

It was actually hard to get access to some areas of the shop – they wanted to push us out the door as quickly as possible. Their attitude toward our questions was basically, "This is how we do business. If you don't like it…"

And the amazing thing was, this site was producing medical components.

That's probably not typical of non-ISO facilities, but the truth is, it's easy to get to that place if you don't have a constant and systematic commitment to quality. Being as meticulous as we are doesn't come naturally to most people, so we rely on the ISO process and our own quality standards to allow us ordinary mortals to do heroic work.

How do you feel about visitors to BMS?

Call us to make an appointment and find out! If you're considering engaging a blow molding shop, you should feel completely comfortable with their processes and physical plant.

We'll be happy to show you around, so you can decide for yourself if this document is some fantasy cooked up by marketing, or if it really represents the DNA and heart of BMS.

To make an appointment, contact sales@bmsplastics.com or call 401-723-3000.