

The Art of Conversation

Four board members reveal how you can gain their ear

TALKING YOUR WAY TO THE TOP MAY SEEM

tricky but the ability to impress the board is a talent well worth nurturing. No matter how well conceived your plan or project may be, securing the board's approval and funding will depend on your ability to sell your message effectively. Quality is often perceived as a complex subject to explain to those not in the field but if you master the art of effective communication, you will be able to convey your ideas and get it onto the agenda.

But how do you address the board and what are the frames of reference you should use when discussing the importance of quality? The art of conversation is a balance between elegance, knowledge and creative execution, and this should shape your

pitch. Selling your message will depend on your ability to listen attentively, present information clearly, ask the right questions and pay attention to the answers – only then will you get the board's buy-in.

QW asked four board members from different roles in the construction, engineering and transport sectors, for their top advice for quality professionals who want to speak the language of leaders. Here's how you can gain the ear of the board...

COMPILED BY:
Amanda
Pauley



KEITH COLLETT, CEO AT NUVIA AVOID 'ISO' SPEAK

Sometimes quality professionals fail to get the attention of their audience and it's often because they do little more than regurgitate the requirements of a standard



Q Quality professionals who are able to convey the quality message in a simple manner give me confidence that they know their subject and as a result, I'm more likely to trust what I'm being told. I use information presented to me to help determine whether the organisation is doing what's necessary to operate at its best, and what action to take to address any areas of underperformance. Trust is vital. Sometimes quality professionals fail to get the attention of their audience and it's often because they do little more than regurgitate the requirements of a standard. It's essential to be able to translate requirements into something meaningful and relevant to the business. People who get my attention are those who demonstrate they know our business and are able to relate their area of expertise to that of our executive team.

Make it relevant

You need to think about how your audience wants to receive messages. The purpose of the board is twofold – addressing the day-to-day and tactical requirements, while building a strong, sustainable organisation for the future. Quality professionals need to consider this when talking to the board and think about the way that what they're planning to tell us will help with our purpose. You need to use your insight and knowledge to critically assess business objectives and add value by:

- Providing meaningful information (not data) about business risks and how we're fulfilling the requirements placed on the company.
- Help identify what the company can do to push itself further and achieve better things for all stakeholders.
- Help to recognise and seize opportunities for critical innovation and investment that ensure the success and sustainability of the business.

Think risk and opportunity

Health and Safety (H&S) professionals have succeeded in demonstrating the business case for upfront investment in H&S culture. For example, reducing H&S risks before they occur is a significant part of our loss-prevention strategy, and everyone understands its contribution to the bottom line. Quality professionals will only achieve similar results if they succeed in showing how their expertise can help to prevent loss and maximise opportunities. To do this you must become business professionals first, and subject-matter experts second. While this isn't easy, it's the reality. Those who are able to do it will have little problem getting buy-in from the board or CEO.



Quality professionals need to focus on looking forward – finding opportunities in quality planning rather than dwelling on the cost of poor quality after the event. It's about being the voice that makes us aware of the exponential cost of failure and rework, and encouraging an empowered workforce to be more accountable for meeting requirements. If, as an organisation, we already aim for zero harm, zero waste, zero carbon and so on, why not strive for zero defects? You need to tell everyone why quality isn't just the role of the quality managers, it's part of everyone's job.

Break the mould

It's about looking to other industries – not least manufacturing – to learn how to build-in quality and demystify what successful implementation looks like. But keep the quality jargon out of our boardroom and talk to us in our terms – programme, cash and people. At Balfour Beatty, we recognise our supply chain partner's share in helping us deliver quality and we collaboratively communicate our requirements to them through an online portal. This way expectation is always explicit – not just implied.

Provide solutions

American industrialist Henry Ford once said that "quality means doing it right when no one is looking" and this is important in every facet – be it product, service or transactional quality.

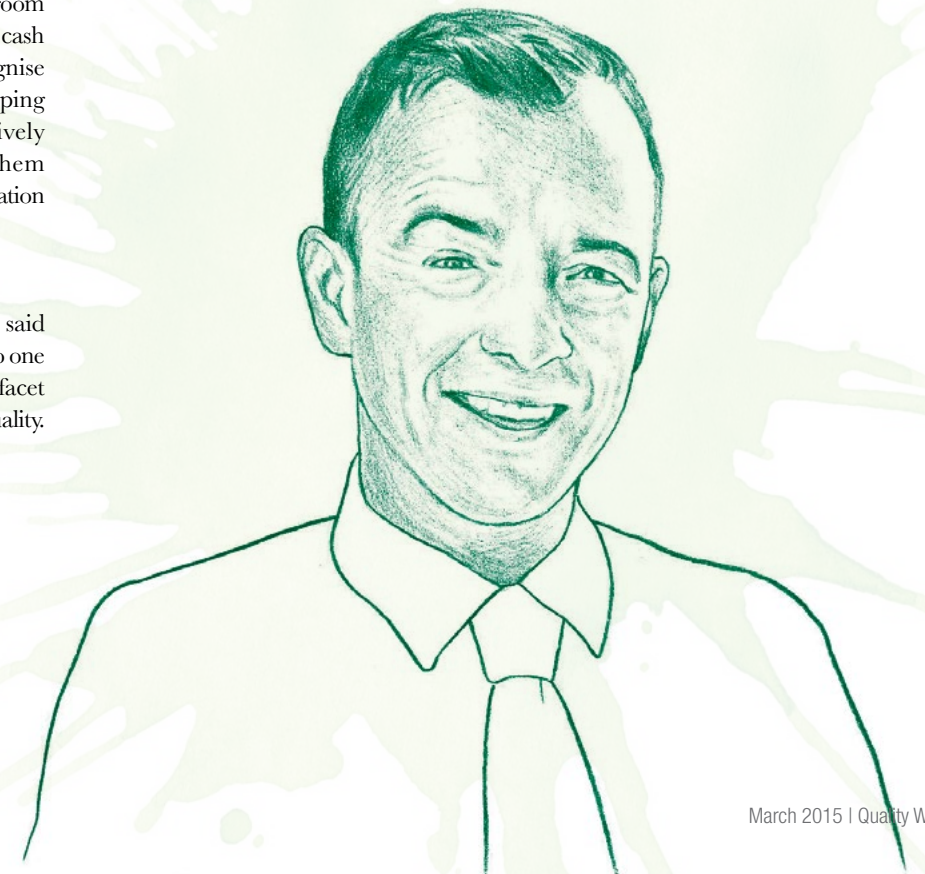
As our business gathers pace in an improving market, I believe quality professionals are key to supporting our project delivery and performance for customers, as well as giving us a competitive edge. But we need you to provide simple solutions to help deliver this, and align quality to other deliverables of the business for it to be meaningful. For example:

- Quality of earnings. This is significant as it improves the working capital management, cash-flow forecasting, and targets a synergy between quality and cash.
- Materials and component selection is important too, recognising the need to buy well, competitively and globally.
- Health and safety (H&S) is a priority for our industry and no one disputes that, but the inconvenient truth is that it's only immediate during the construction phase of our projects. Quality is relevant for the legacy of the building or asset – quality is the long-term H&S. You need to champion this.



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MARTIN CHOWN, PROCUREMENT AND SUPPLY CHAIN DIRECTOR AT BALFOUR BEATTY BE ASSERTIVE





DAVID ALLEN, FINANCE DIRECTOR AT CROSSRAIL MAKE THE GRADE

Our team of quality, assurance and audit professionals play a number of crucial roles in the organisation, but there are always ways to be even more influential

The construction industry has often found it difficult to define effective ways of managing quality. Every building job is different and there are few repetitive processes within projects. At Crossrail we've challenged ourselves, and our contractors, to be more ambitious about how we approach it. What we expect from quality professionals is advice on the effectiveness of our management system, credible assurance and a real drive to get stuff designed and built right first time.

Getting professional recognition of your knowledge and expertise is something we really value. For example, 21 of our employees have achieved CQI Chartered Member status over the past year while working for us, or one of our contractors. The only way we will produce the railway we want safely, on time and within budget, is if we can get a grip on the quality of what we do.

Ask the right questions

The financial, safety and schedule effects of poor quality are potentially very significant for our programmes. In addition to the basic costs of reworking a design or reinstalling a section of concrete in a tunnel underground, there can be additional materials to buy as well as waste handling, transportation costs and the changes to follow-on contracts that may be needed to accommodate a delay.

Quality professionals need to come to the board with ideas on how to improve efficiency and lower cost and risk. Don't be afraid to tell us new ways to achieve ambitious reductions in energy use and the emissions created by diesel-powered construction vehicles. Challenge us to reduce the tiny proportion of our waste that is sent to landfill and support us in making sure that the social impacts of our work are positive.

Accept the challenge

Our team of quality, assurance and audit professionals play a number of crucial roles in the organisation, but there are always ways to be even more influential. The work we do is continuously scrutinised so the public know they can trust what we tell them about our progress. The people who will operate the railway need to know that we're handing them a high-quality asset that's reliable and that passengers will enjoy. We've put a big focus on quality but it needs you to push the boundaries and challenge the business to do better.



The key to getting the board's buy-in is clarity at all times and this means understanding all the critical business issues.

As a company, we're meeting national needs in the areas of energy, transportation and water. Customers demand, at all times, our ability to demonstrate the achievement of excellence in every part of our business. Clarity is a vital part of the process and quality professionals must understand that. It will develop insight and trust.

Give facts not jargon

I'm responsible for business assurance and risk, which means I have to focus on governance, assurance and improvement. My job is to understand the risks and I need assurance regarding the current status of the business – ie progress with improvements being launched, or underway, and the effectiveness of the management system and controls. Quality professionals need to provide concise, fact-based, reports that provide an overview of what is happening, highlighting issues along with proposed solutions. In simple terms, avoid the heavy jargon.

Communicating with the board in a process that shows results is the best way to give us an overview of performance and improvement actions. For example, at Costain we're currently achieving this through information we receive on quality matters in the monthly *Business Improvement Assessment Report*. It provides a summary of a number of leading key performance indicators for elements of the group's activities, while being measured against a best practice benchmark.

Be the voice of the customer

Having a good understanding of our customer needs and expectations is something I expect from a senior quality professional, and it's something that will ultimately impress the board. It's about showing you can ensure we focus our improvements to help our customers deliver a better service, and improve their own business or service to their end users. Quality professionals need to be assertive and knowledgeable. You need to communicate to us that we have a management system that provides assurance by making sure:

- Our systems, procedures and processes are effective at mitigating identified risks.
- Customer expectations are understood, communicated and effectively delivered.
- Our activities are compliant with codes of practice and appropriate legislation.
- Management controls are consistently applied across the group.
- Performance is reviewed, validated and continually improved.

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TONY BICKERSTAFF, GROUP FINANCE DIRECTOR AT COSTAIN NO MORE COMPLEXITY

