

Advancing quality for humanity

In January 2023, Lars Sörqvist became the 17th President of the International Academy for Quality (IAQ), an independent, non-profit organisation made up of 100 invited members of the global quality profession. Since the 1960s, the IAQ has worked to advance quality for the good of humanity. Here, Sörqvist reflects on the work of the organisation and what he believes the future holds for the quality profession

QW: What was your own journey into quality?

LS: I have always worked with quality, in two ways. First is through my personality, as I have always been interested in looking at how to improve things and create value.

The second is through my work. I did my Bachelor's degree in marketing and a Master's in production engineering, and, after that, a friend, who was in charge of an Ericsson plant, asked me to help her with some work on the costs of poor quality.

When I started work on that, I realised that marketing is about understanding customers' needs, which is closely aligned with quality, while production engineering is about understanding processes and how value is created. When I was studying in the 1980s, we didn't call it Lean – the term was not invented then – but we talked about Japanese manufacturing philosophies. We learned about them, but we perhaps did not connect them to the customer, because we were still focusing on quality in manufacturing. When I started working on the

costs of poor quality at Ericsson, the pieces fell into place for me, tying together customer service and value creation.

I really got interested in quality after that and developed a deep connection with Lennart Sandholm, of Sandholm Associates, a leading training company for quality improvement. It was the first such organisation in Europe when Lennart founded it in 1971, together with Joseph Juran, who was his mentor and with whom we worked very closely until his death.

I had completed some courses with Lennart when I was studying production engineering at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, where he was a professor. He was my supervisor when I did my PhD in poor-quality costing, and he became my mentor and close friend. I became an associate professor at the Royal Institute of Technology, teaching quality, but became more and more involved in Sandholm Associates because of my friendship with Lennart, becoming president in the mid-2000s when Lennart retired. ▶



Lars Sörqvist, President of the IAQ, which he joined in 2008.

INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY FOR QUALITY

The IQA was founded in 1966 by Dr Armand V Feigenbaum, of the ASQ, Dr Kaoru Ishikawa, of the JUSE, and Dr Walter E Masing, of the EOQ. It has grown to include 100 members, who are identified and recruited by the IAQ, and are divided proportionately into thirds between Asia, America, and Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA). Members currently represent more than 45 nations.

The IAQ's *Quality Manifesto* lists 10 ways in which it seeks to enable leadership through quality:

- Deepen our art and science
- Do no harm
- Extend our scope
- Go beyond business
- Serve our customers
- Build strategy the quality way
- Involve everyone
- Create trust and happiness
- Bring data into daily conversations
- Embrace the new technologies

To read the full *Manifesto*, go to bit.ly/3HgsDk

For more on the IAQ, go to: bit.ly/3jjU33K



QW: How did you first become involved with the International Academy for Quality (IAQ)?

LS: Since the late 1990s, Sandholm Associates has been my main focus, but I have also been very involved with other quality organisations, including the American Society for Quality (ASQ) and the Shanghai Association for Quality. I have been involved in Swedish quality organisations, but probably even more involved with international organisations.

Lennart had a very strong connection with the IAQ, so, in some ways, I became involved with it rather earlier than expected. Many of the older members of IAQ in the 1990s were close friends of Lennart, so, very early on in my quality journey, I was introduced to many of them. Even though I was not a member of IAQ, because I was far too junior, several of them became personal friends, so, when I joined the IAQ, in the second half of 2008, I knew most of the people there.

I became vice-president and, for 12 years, was responsible for our examining committee. I was elected president-elect two years ago, and, in January, I became our new president.

QW: What was the purpose of the IAQ when it was founded and how has that evolved over the years?

LS: The IAQ was founded in 1966 by the ASQ, the European Organisation for Quality (EOQ) and the Japanese Union of Scientists and Engineers (JUSE). They saw a need for their organisations to work more closely together and felt the best way to do that was to connect people, because organisations

are built on people. They thought, if they collaborated, the distance between their organisations would be shorter. Today, of course, there are other strong quality organisations, but we can say we speak for all three through individual members and the countries and organisations they represent.

We perform our work mostly through think tanks, and we have a number of these, focusing on important areas within quality. They could be in different knowledge areas – such as quality in statistics, improvement or innovation – and different sectors, including healthcare and education.

Today, we focus a lot on quality in the area of sustainability – how we can develop in a more sustainable way through the tools, methods and philosophies of quality management. That also led us to found the IAQ Quality Sustainability Award four years ago, to promote the initiatives, good examples and success stories in this area [bit.ly/3Y5Yxti].

QW: Sustainability is currently a hot topic in all sectors. What role does quality have to play in developing and maintaining sustainable practices?

LS: Quality is about creating higher value with lesser use of resources – exactly what sustainable development is about.

People all over the world are aware that we need to change and move to another way of living. There are so many reports telling us that the way we live and run organisations today is not right, either now or in the future.

However, we have little understanding of how to get to a more sustainable place. Too often, we see sustainability



“To have a more united global quality profession, I think it is important to have a common mindset and common goals”

initiatives that later turn out to be completely wrong. Quality work and continual improvement is a controlled process, and it is something we can do here and now to help develop sustainable practices globally.

We know that, if we look at the costs of poor quality, an enormous number of resources are giving us nothing, so are being wasted. A fact-based, systematic way of solving problems with processes is needed, and that is through quality. By understanding the needs of humanity, we can focus on doing the right thing, with quality tools and processes.

QW: The IAQ supported the UN in its efforts to bring quality to the developing world – why is this work so important?

LS: If we look at the IAQ think tanks and knowledge areas, and compare them with the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, we can see connections to all of them.

It is critical to support developing countries in evolving quality. What differs between such countries and richer ones is, in many ways, how they create value from their resources. Quality is about creating value, so, if we can strengthen their systems – from public organisations to industry – to take care of resources and create a high value in what they do, they also could generate an income and waste fewer resources.

In 1972, with support from the UN and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Lennart Sandholm started up quality training programmes in developing countries to assist in creating industry in them. I also got involved in those programmes, which offered a real opportunity to ensure industry was developed in such a way that people could get the most value from the limited resources available in some countries. Over the years, we have given training in 47 countries.

QW: In 2021, the IAQ published its *Quality Manifesto for the 21st Century*. What was the driver to publish this document?

LS: To have a more united global quality profession, I think it is important to have a common mindset and common goals. The speed of change is increasing and we know that the old way of thinking is not the right way for the future, so we also have to start to question what we are really doing.

We know that, when we work with any organisation, it is so important to have common objectives to align people, and it is the same in the area of quality. The need for a common



way of thinking and of looking at the future is important, because if everyone has their own picture, even if they are similar, it will be more difficult to work towards a shared goal.

QW: The Manifesto states: "We believe that quality can and must be applied for the betterment of humanity". Can you explain what is meant by that?

LS: This is very close to the purpose and the mission of the IAQ – it is about bringing quality to humanity.

Quality is about people. Whether they are customers or in another position, quality is about understanding their expectations and their needs; quality is about creating value for people and it is about quality of life.

In the 1980s, the quality profession started to focus more on service industries, bringing quality into healthcare, schools and social care. Historically, quality was just in industrial companies, and it was easy to think only from that perspective. However, for a long while now we have widened that view, and the time has come to take the next step and talk about humanity as the main stakeholder for quality.

That also aligns with what is increasingly talked about – the future success factors for businesses. For companies, it is not enough simply to have satisfied customers; they must also fulfil the needs of society, their country, and the planet. Firms

"The time has come to take the next step and talk about humanity as the main stakeholder for quality"

that fail to do so will not exist in the future.

We can look at the European Commission Taxonomy as an example. If you are outside of what is sustainable, you will find it very hard to get financial support in the future. This is not an innovation driven by quality, but we have seen that quality has to follow this development – and I believe it has.

QW: Embracing new technologies is among the ways of globally enabling 'leadership through quality' in the Manifesto. How important are new technologies to the future of quality?

LS: Technology is critical and it gives so many new opportunities when working with quality. Processes and

products are now much more connected. Using smart computer-based systems to analyse and understand things creates totally different possibilities and ways of working.

Digitalisation may change the world of quality professionals, but the opposite is also important. We need to ensure quality thinking in digitalisation. Some years ago, I began talking about the cost of poor digitalisation as part of the cost of poor quality, because we see huge investments in new technology and not all creates value – sometimes, it is technology for the sake of technology.

QW: How important is collaboration in promoting quality as a way of future-proofing for organisations?

LS: A very important purpose of the IAQ is to build bridges and open doors; we continue to arrange meetings with quality organisations all over the world to strengthen the network between us all.

On a wider scale, we are seeing countries moving further apart from each other, but I am a strong believer in the mindset that the closer and more connected we are, the less risk there will be for war and other disruptions. Quality is the framework for this collaboration and trust.

We are already so reliant on each other – for instance, if we lost our supply chains with China, it would be difficult for Europe, because we are so dependent. We made those decisions a long time ago and now we have to strengthen relations between countries. We can talk about moving production back to Europe and, while this might happen, we still have companies that are based all over the world. We have global markets, as well as local, and the interdependency is critical.

QW: Do you think people outside of the quality profession have come to realise that quality management is necessary to drive such changes?

LS: If we compare what our models, books and research say about quality today, there is quite a big gap between that and the average organisation. If you look at a world-class organisation, what it does is also very different from what an average organisation does. So that is the first gap – between the world-class organisations and our models and knowledge, and the average organisation. The second gap is where we are today and where we want to be in the future.

We have a challenge because we need to get as many organisations as possible up to a certain level. First, we have to convince the people in those organisations. There is still a feeling in top management that the main objective for the quality manager is to maintain certification. This is far from what we teach today, when we talk about quality management as a management approach to create higher value with fewer resources and less waste.

I think we, as quality professionals, are still in a situation where we have to prove something and where proof is very important, which is why all of our awards are so important at telling success stories and showcasing good examples.

We are facing a perfect storm of financial challenges,



“A very important purpose of the IAQ is to build bridges and open doors”

sustainability and environmental issues, war, immigration, and so on. These are big problems, but they also provide opportunities to develop more agile organisations that have the ability to improve and develop; that is exactly what quality is.

Being agile is based on a foundation of continual improvement; it is about an organisation that is always on the move and developing. This is exactly what we are talking about within quality management, and have done so for many years. The challenge is to get people to change their view of quality from being something that is static and bureaucratic to something dynamic and agile. ■