Perceptions of ISO 9004 Quality Service Management Standards for Visitor Services: What Do Parks Canada Employees Really Think?

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Abstract

Under the new Parks Canada Agency, visitor numbers, expenditures and satisfaction play an enhanced role in determining operating budgets for the entire system and for individual sites.   As such, service quality has become an important theme in Parks Canada operating guidelines, and the agency-visitor relationship is often seen as the key to evaluating service quality performance.   Although much research has explored visitors' perceptions of service quality, little has been done to understand quality control from the agency's perspective.   One option for an agency's quality control is to implement a management standards program into its operating system.   This study examined staff perceptions of issues associated with potential implementation of the ISO 9004 quality management standards into Canada's National Parks and National Historic Sites.   ISO 9004 are generic guidelines for quality management and are adaptable to both the public and private sectors.   Interviews were conducted at Point Pelee National Park and Woodside National Historic Site.   Because the involvement and commitment of the entire organization is instrumental to implementation, participants were selected from several levels of the agency.   Staff identified benefits and challenges of implementation and often viewed the challenges they identified as opportunities for organizational growth.   Staff also demonstrated an overall positive attitude and willingness to change, if adequate

and appropriate organizational and managerial supports were in place. This study provided preliminary evidence that staff perceive ISO 9004 as suitable for implementation into Parks Canada. This would be a complex undertaking that would require a great deal of organizational commitment and research into the process.

1. Background: Parks Canada and Service Quality

The client-provider service quality relationship has gained prominence in Canada's National Parks and Historic Sites now that Parks Canada has become an operating agency under Bill C-29. Under this new management structure, the collection of user fees will play an enhanced role in determining operating budgets for the system and individual parks and sites, since the amount of fees collected will be allocated directly back into the system[1]. This means that an increase in park visitation could constitute an increase in park income and create a need for the park to maintain a suitable level of visitation in order to maintain an acceptable budget. With this increased importance on maintaining visitor numbers, the agency has renewed its commitment to continued quality service and enduring high levels of visitor satisfaction as marked by the implementation of the Parks Canada Guarantee[2].

The Parks Canada Revenue Policy, as the guarantee is officially known, was introduced in May 1998 to guarantee the public "excellent value, quality service, and fair prices" to address service shortfalls and to add value to those services for which fees are charged at national parks, historic sites and historic canals[2]. This is intended to foster long-term client loyalty (i.e. repeat visitation) and to help Parks Canada continually improve their services by fostering ongoing communication between the agency and its clients.

This also means that park agencies are expected to maintain, if not improve the quality of their sites as well as the quality of their visitor services in spite of limited operating budgets. This is to be accomplished by virtue of

increased efficiency of all remaining staff at the park sites.   Often, this increased efficiency is expected without any

employee consultation or reward structure.

A lack of employee involvement or incentive is often the key element in the breakdown of quality service[3]

that inevitably leads to visitor dissatisfaction and reduced visitor numbers.   Not only do dissatisfied visitors often

not return to the site, they also share their negative experiences with other potential visitors[2,4].   This chain of events

could be disastrous for a park or site that depends on visitor numbers for much of its operating budget.

Another complication is that visitors have different definitions of service quality based on their personal

experiences at different sites.   They also have different expectations of quality and varying standards against which

they judge the service they receive.   This makes quality control and evaluation of service quality extremely

problematic for park managers because the definition of service quality is abstract and subject to change.

Park managers are responsible for effectively administering all park resources, not only those rated most

highly by the visitor, and must manage those resources while simultaneously considering the local community and

long-term planning issues.   Experience-based, visitor satisfaction measures are not enough to help park managers

make these decisions effectively without first having a context in which to consider them.   For example, visitor

satisfaction measures may not adequately reflect the importance of allocating funds towards the preservation of an

area or species, but may over-emphasize the importance of allocating resources towards the provision of campground

facilities at the site.   Furthermore, visitor satisfaction measures based on a single visit to the site may not be

adequate for consideration of planning issues that reflect the interests of the local community, advocacy groups, or the

park agency's mandate and guidelines.

The park manager must also consider the needs of the park staff in the allocation of resources and the

provision of services, but the importance of staff needs are likely not reflected in the outcomes of visitor satisfaction

surveys.   Therefore, it would seem plausible that the implementation of an effective service quality initiative would require input from a perspective beyond that of the park visitors and would be aided by a context, such as agency guidelines, in which to consider those perspectives.

Although a great deal of work has been done to understand service quality from the eyes of the client[5,6,7,8], little has been done to understand the control or provision of quality services from the provider's perspective.   It is important to explore what the service provider can do to ensure that their clients have a positive experience each time they visit the site, in order to foster client satisfaction and encourage repeat-business to the site.

Standardization of a general framework (e.g. guiding principles) can be a mechanism used to create a context in which findings from a variety of settings can be compared and evaluated.   This could be extremely beneficial in a park agency that manages a large number of unique parks under a single administrative umbrella with a common mandate.   Standardization of general service quality goals could provide a context in which each individual park would have the flexibility to manage its own resources in a manner best suited to the site while simultaneously adhering to the overall objectives and guidelines of the park agency.   Furthermore, Park Canada's private sector approach to public stewardship fosters an environment in which a private sector quality assurance model can be usefully modified and applied to visitor services.   One comprehensive quality assurance model from the private sector is the ISO 9000 quality system standards.

2. ISO 9000 Series of Standards

The ISO quality management standards were designed in 1987 by the International Organization for

Standardization in Sweden to facilitate international trade by ensuring product and service quality through the

standardization of products, processes, procedures and other characteristics of services[9].   The ISO standards have

become global benchmarks of quality in production systems, environmental integrity, and service delivery in over 51

countries[10].

The ISO 9004 series of standards, as a subset ISO 9000, are generic guidelines for quality management and

service quality system elements[9], and focus on the management of the quality system instead of the core elements of

the system itself.   This generalizablity makes the series well suited to a variety of applications and settings, both in

the public and private sectors.   The goal of ISO 9004 is to meet client needs at low cost to the organization via a

quality system that addresses efficiency and effectiveness[10].   A quality system can be defined as the plans,

responsibilities, procedures, and resources that must be in place to consistently satisfy client needs.

ISO 9004 is based on the following assumptions: that an organization's enduring level of quality is

dependent on that organization's commitment to its quality objectives on all levels; that quality objectives have been

created to ensure that both client and organizational needs are understood and met; that failure to meet quality

objectives can result in adverse effects on the client, the organization, and society in general; and, that continual

review and improvement of the established system based on client feedback around their perceptions of the service

provided is essential[11].

Potential benefits of successfully implementing the ISO series of quality standards include improved

efficiency, operating cost reduction, improved service performance and client satisfaction, an increased market share,

and increased capacity to meet all of the organization's mandates and objectives[9,10,12].   To achieve these benefits,

the quality system for services should consider the human aspect of service provision by recognizing that personal

relationships are a crucial aspect of a service and that consideration of the client's perception of the organization is

important to all elements of service quality[3].   The organization must also manage the social processes involved in

service provision by developing employee skills and inspiring staff to continuously improve quality and to meet, if not

exceed, client expectations[11].

Several issues must be explored prior to the implementation of a quality system using the guidelines offered

in the ISO 9004 series of standards.   The feasibility of implementation must be addressed, the organizational culture

must be considered, with front line staff as well as management at all levels being consulted, and the degree of

organizational resistance to change should be evaluated.

3. Research Objectives

This study's primary purpose was the examination of staff perceptions of opportunities and barriers associated with the potential implementation of the ISO 9004 standards into the Parks Canada system. The secondary focus was on the degree of staff acceptance/resistance to change as represented by the potential implementation of ISO 9004 at their sites. Finally, the feasibility of implementing a quality system of standards such as ISO 9004 into the Parks Canada system is not well understood, nor well represented in the literature. This gap was addressed through the qualitative examination of two case studies, Point Pelee National Park and Woodside National Historic Site, using two data collection techniques – interviews and analysis of secondary sources (Parks Canada documentation). Employees from different levels in the organizational structure at each site were interviewed and asked to comment on their perceptions of the feasibility of implementing a quality system based on the ISO 9004 series of standards.

4. Case Study Site Descriptions

Point Pelee National Park is located in the St. Lawrence Lowlands, in the southern most tip of Ontario, Canada along the shore of Lake Erie. It was designated as a national park in 1918 as a site to protect migratory birds. The park is small (15 km^2), but is host to between 400,000 and 500,000 visitors (gate entrances) annually[13]. It is the only Canadian National Park that has imposed a limit on the number of visitors that can be within the park at any one time because of the high levels of visitation relative to the park's size[13]. Point Pelee's management plan also outlines several other techniques to manage visitors, such as structured trails and public transportation, implying that the park is concerned both with conservation and the quality of the park as perceived by visitors.

Woodside National Historic Site is located in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada and is 4.65 hectares in size. It

was established as the Woodside Trust in the early 1940s as it was the childhood home of Canada's tenth and longest serving Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King[14]. It has been restored to represent life as it was in the early 1890s. The objective of the site is to ensure the commemorative integrity of nationally and historically significant places, persons, and events[14]. There are a variety of visitor services and programs aimed at all sectors of society (e.g. children, seniors, and those with physical challenges). This focus on a range of client groups implies that Woodside is committed to providing a quality experience to meet a variety of visitor needs.

5. Participant Selection

Participants at each site were selected based on their role at the site to be representative of the various staff levels in the organization. This was done because one of the basic principles underlying the implementation of ISO 9004 into any service setting is the involvement and commitment of every member of that service organization. Although interviewing every member of the organization was beyond the scope of this study, it was still important that each level of the organization be represented by at least one interviewee. Participant selection was influenced by Parks Canada management staff involved in recruitment.

The sample for this study consisted of eight participants who represented different levels of the organization at each site. There was one representative from a Friends group, two from heritage presentation/program development, one from the warden service, one from a private contractor, two from administration/marketing, and one representative from upper management. The participants were all female, their tenure with Parks Canada ranged from one to twenty years, and their cumulative experience included front line, volunteer, management, administration and interpretation duties.

The front line experience category included any position involving direct contact with the client, such as gate

staff, warden service, or visitor program delivery.   As almost all of the participants had experience with heritage

presentation (interpretation), it was included as a separate category of responsibility.   The management category

denoted a supervisory position and the administration category included upper level management and marketing

roles.   The volunteer category denoted experience with a Friends group in Parks Canada.

6. Data Collection & Analysis

Interviews occurred during a face-to-face meeting with the participants, following one to several telephone

conversations to finalize an interview time.   It is important to note that in some cases it was quite difficult to obtain

an interview with staff due to the nature of their position in relation to the visitor season at the time of the interviews.

The interviewer used an informal, or semi-structured, open-ended technique facilitated by an interview guide.   All

interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Field notes were taken during and immediately following the completion of the interviews.   They included

a description of the setting where the interview took place, an overview of the participants' dispositions, and

preliminary analytical insights regarding data analysis.   This helped the researcher to remain politically and

contextually sensitive during data analysis and provided a source of methodological triangulation, which strengthened

the study design[15,16].   A framework for understanding the data was constructed using cross-case analysis[17] and the

constant-comparative method[18].

Analysis involved developing categories from the data and making comparisons and contrasts of each

category and any new information as it was presented.   The goal of this qualitative approach was to look for

patterns that were meaningful both within and between cases[18].   Patterns, themes, and categories emerged out of

the data rather than being imposed on participants prior to the data collection and analysis[16].

Contribution from documentation sources played an important role in providing support for the analysis findings.   The interview participants were also asked to review the transcripts and to add to their comments prior to the completion of the data analysis.   This was to help clarify misunderstandings in the analysis and to provide the participants with an opportunity to ask further questions.   The findings were confirmed by the participants, thus providing another source of methodological triangulation for the study[15,16].

7. Climate of Change

Before discussing the staff reactions to the potential implementation of the ISO 9004 guidelines, it is important to have a clear understanding of the organizational climate in which that change would occur[19].   Due to the recent restructuring of the Parks Canada Agency, the organization is currently in a state of flux and constant change that applies to everything from business plans and job descriptions to the everyday operation of individual sites.   Because of this, staff members seem to have become more accustomed to, and therefore, more willing to change.   For example, when asked about the effects on staff due to recent restructuring of Parks Canada under Bill C-29, the study participants all responded positively and seemed to be comfortable with the idea of future change.

Overall, the participants seemed to be willing to consider and adopt new initiatives, especially given favourable conditions within the organization (e.g. management support and adequate resources).   However, this strong sense of involvement could also act as a foundation for fear of change, if that change threatened the staff's level of participation in the decision-making process or locus of control[19,20].   Several of the participants felt that if staff are not given the opportunity to provide input about the new initiative, they are less likely to be committed to the process of change.   This could lead staff to a sense of dissatisfaction with their positions and with the agency overall, which would eventually influence their performance in the provision of quality services[19].

Management support, communication, incentives and staff involvement can all be used to address staff

fears and resistance to change and increase staff buy-in to the new initiative[21,22].   Management support could take

the form of increased staff consultation and involvement in the decision-making processes, continuous provision of

leadership and guidance during the upheaval created by the change, and through staff recognition and rewards[23].

8. Recommendations for Practice

The national park and national historic site staff that participated in this study provided a great deal of

insight into several issues regarding implementation of change (as represented by ISO 9004) at their sites.   These

participants noted that they had already accepted many responsibilities beyond those mandated by their official job

descriptions.   They seemed comfortable with this concept and indicated that they would maintain this practice if it

continued to result in higher levels of visitor satisfaction.   This willingness to change, as an element of the

organizational climate, could be used as a strong foundation on which to build a new and innovative management

approach, such as one based on ISO 9004.

This finding supports recent work that has shown that high levels of staff involvement with and a clear

understanding of the organizational climate at the time change is introduced is instrumental to the success of

implementing that change[3,19,24].   The concept that staff who are highly committed to their specific responsibilities as

well as to the agency foster a positive attitude towards change within the culture of that agency[20,21,22] is also supported

by this finding.

Staff members identified many opportunities for organizational growth if the Parks Canada Agency was to

seriously consider implementation of ISO.   Several participants reported that their site's training responsibilities

would be considerably improved by carefully developed training standards (an essential element of the ISO

guidelines), which are not in place at this time.   For example, many sites hire part-time or seasonal staff to fulfill front line duties that bring them into contact with visitors.   Therefore, it is essential to visitor satisfaction and the measurement of that satisfaction that these staff members are trained to provide the highest quality of service possible.   This is consistent with recent work in the service quality literature that reported adequate training measures to be an integral part of a successful service quality initiative[3,25] and with the ISO literature that purports standardized training to be one of the most essential elements of the ISO guidelines[10,26].

Another opportunity for growth identified by the participants was the potential influence of the ISO guidelines on the quality provision of visitor services.   As visitor satisfaction is often influenced by personal services, standardization of visitor service practices could help to promote consistency of service provision within an individual park or site, while simultaneously providing a mechanism to enhance the level of service consistency across the system.   This would prevent individual sites from having to "re-invent the wheel" in the provision of quality visitor services by providing them with the opportunity to build on the experiences of other sites and use their own resources more effectively.   Much of the literature on the ISO standards reported that the guidelines are a useful tool for an agency to create a general framework for a service quality management system[9,27].

Although it was acknowledged that the provision of visitor services have an impact on levels of client satisfaction, the staff members also voiced the importance of considering all aspects of the client's experience in any attempt to develop standards for the park system.   As such, another aspect of standardized delivery could be aimed at the development and maintenance of a site's physical infrastructure.   Standardization of site facilities could help each site to determine its strengths and weaknesses by having a consistent benchmark across the system against which each site could evaluate itself[12].   For the Parks Canada Agency, this could help justify the level of fees charged to the visitor or provide incentive for administration to provide resources to improve site facilities.

The study participants also identified a strong need for a broad level of consultation in the decision-making and implementation process. Ideally, this consultation would include a variety of stakeholder groups. This would mean that targeted consultation of groups such as park visitors and members of the local community, for example, would be part of any standard setting exercise. Although the importance of employee and client consultation is often found in the ISO literature[9,10,26,27,28], the findings from this study go beyond the literature to report the importance of undertaking a broad scope of stakeholder consultation. The participants readily identified their site's stakeholders as important sources of information and noted that a public relations benefit could result from the involvement of those groups in efforts to enhance the park or site's visitor management system in more strategic directions.

Despite their agreement on the need for consultation, the participants had some difference in opinion regarding the process for developing the standards for their sites. Some felt that it should be done incrementally amongst park programs and facilities in order to make best use of sparse time and resources. Others felt that it would be best to use a lead-site approach where individual parks would take their turn in the process, learning from the experiences of their predecessors, while others felt that the process would work best if done comprehensively over the entire site and system at one time. This is consistent with both the service quality and ISO literature that reports the need for individual organizations to create a plan for the development and implementation of standards that is best-suited to their needs[9,24,26].

It must be noted that all of the participants mentioned marketing procedures and outputs as critical to the development and operation of service standards. Marketing techniques could be used in tandem with service provision guidelines to increase visitor numbers and enhance visitor understanding of the site's mandate and goals. Therefore, it is essential that marketing personnel be involved in the setting of those standards for the site and the

system.   Although the role of marketing is widely recognized in the service quality literature from the private

sector[12,23,25,29], the findings from this study go beyond that work to report the important role of marketing in the public

sector (as represented by Parks Canada).   This role of marketing would be enhanced if Parks Canada implemented

the ISO guidelines, but would remain important to the organization whether or not that implementation was

undertaken.

The staff members in this study were also very supportive of evaluation procedures at their sites.

Evaluation was generally regarded as an opportunity to get feedback from the client groups and to improve programs

and service delivery.   This finding is consistent with the service quality and ISO literature that reports the positive

role of evaluation in a variety of guises[6,8,9,27,29]. Furthermore, positive outcomes of evaluation were regarded by all of

the participants as a tangible reward for a job well done.   This supports the concept that an adequate staff reward

system is an essential part of successfully implementing organizational change as well as the ISO standards[19,21,23].

The study participants also identified several barriers to implementation including time, available personal

energy and potential costs. These barriers were all consistent with those noted in the ISO literature[26,28].   Most of the

participants provided solutions during their discussion of barriers, thus turning potential obstacles into opportunities.

  Again, this is indicative of a positive climate in which to consider the implementation of a service standards program.

Although previously described as an opportunity, continual evaluation was also mentioned as a potential

barrier to successful implementation.   The staff discussed concerns about the dangers of a centralized evaluation

system that is mandated from senior levels of the organization without adequate site-level consultation.   It was

made clear that for an ongoing evaluation system to be accepted and implemented by front-line staff that they, along

with other staff members, be heavily involved in its development[10,20,22].

In addition to a high level of involvement in the decision-making and implementation process, the staff

members noted that it would be essential to have enduring management support for any standards initiative. The literature reports that it is fundamental that all levels of the organization, especially management, are committed to the program for the long run[21,23,25,27]. The participants recognized that a substantial amount of time, effort and resources would be required to develop and initiate such a program, and that the long-term benefits would outweigh the initial costs. However, they would not be willing to commit to such a program unless there was strong assurance from senior management that the initiative would be seen through to completion and maintenance of the system over time.

Overall, most of the staff felt that their site's existing visitor services were competent and could easily fit into the ISO framework, but that in order to encourage acceptance of the initiative, an appropriate staff reward structure must be adopted concurrently with program development and implementation. Furthermore, the participants were aware of and supportive of agency-wide and nation-wide development and implementation of policy as a general principle. They identified many advantages of developing agency-wide standards for quality services. However, for quality service management to be effective, a fair staff reward system must be in place[3,22,23].

Finally, the park and site staff expressed a general openness to the concept of change and of the adaptation to and consideration of new programs. They demonstrated a willingness to consider a service quality program such as ISO 9004. However, this willingness was contingent upon long-term management support, an open and wide-ranging consultative process, sufficient time, energy and financial resources to develop and implement the program and the adoption of an appropriate staff reward structure.

9. Recommendations for Research

In addition to the many implications for practical applications, this study raised several issues that provide

ample opportunity for further exploration.   Further research could, for example, pilot test the various approaches of the implementation process discussed above and could recommend ideal options given a variety of specific circumstances (e.g. partial implementation, full implementation, nation-wide implementation).   In addition to testing implementation processes, it would also be useful to assess different means of educating the different sites and sectors of the agency on the ISO guidelines (using the most up-to-date version of ISO).   Implementation could not successfully occur without organizational knowledge and understanding of the initiative, therefore it would be important to determine how this undertaking could best be accomplished.

Future research could use focus groups to undertake wider explorations of staff perceptions of and reactions to the potential adoption of this initiative at a broader range of sites.   Also, it would be important and timely to assess the suitability of the standards for other sectors of the Parks Canada Agency such as head office/administration, regional offices and national marine conservation areas.

As mentioned in the findings section, the study participants were all female, despite concerted efforts to represent both genders.   It could be hypothesized that females may demonstrate a higher or lower level of acceptance to change than males and, given the results of this study, it would be interesting and informative if future work included the responses of male staff members.   It is important to note that this study found the participants to have an overall acceptance of and positive attitude toward change.   This is atypical of the organizational change literature that reported employee resistance to change as a common phenomenon[20,22].   This finding suggests that further work should be done with the Parks Canada Agency to confirm this outcome, or to gain a more comprehensive perspective of the organization's climate and attitude toward change.

Another outcome of this study was the support of the recent organizational change literature that voiced the ultimate importance of staff involvement and commitment to any change initiative[19,21,23].   It is strongly encouraged

that any future work (agency or academic) prompted by this study take these issues under serious consideration.

10. Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to explore the issues raised by the staff at each of the two case study sites - Point Pelee National Park and Woodside National Historic Site. The study focused on the identification of opportunities and barriers associated with the potential implementation of the ISO 9004 guidelines at the participants' sites, the degree of staff acceptance for or resistance to the change represented by implementation of ISO, and the degree to which the ISO guidelines were suitable (based on staff perceptions) for implementation in national parks and national historic sites.

Staff demonstrated an overall positive attitude and willingness to change, provided that adequate and appropriate organizational and managerial supports were in place. They readily identified opportunities and barriers associated with implementation, but often framed barriers as potential opportunities. Further research is necessary to support the generalizabilty of this finding across the Parks Canada system.

Several of the ISO elements already exist in the Parks Canada visitor services framework. This would facilitate the process of implementation were it to occur. Furthermore, the organization, as represented by the study participants, recognized and was aligned with the basic assumptions of the ISO framework. The staff members acknowledged that the level of quality of the visitor services provided at their site was directly related to their commitment to the provision of quality services. Both sites adhered to site-specific and system-wide objectives that had been created to meet both agency and visitor needs and staff recognized that failure to meet these objectives could negatively impact the visitor, the site, or the agency. Finally, the participants acknowledged that continual evaluation and improvement of the system based on visitor feedback was instrumental to the successful provision of

quality visitor services.

In summary, this study provides preliminary evidence that staff perceive the ISO 9004 guidelines to be suitable for implementation into the Parks Canada setting. This would be a complex and difficult undertaking that would require a great deal of organizational commitment as well as in-depth consideration and research into the process. Despite this, it was found that work reported from the private sector and literature from other disciplines proved to be very useful in the development of the study and analysis of the findings. Therefore, it could be extrapolated that these bodies of literature would be useful in both future research on this topic and in the professional applications of the findings from this study.

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