Communicating the Value of Quality Assurance

QA Often Gets Rushed and Blamed for Issues,
Collaborating with Management Can Help Change That

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Introduction

Historically, quality assurance has come at the very end of the SDLC. When development and other phases run long, QA gets shortened. But the QA team is still expected to make deadline, find all the bugs and, as some people seem to think, assure absolute quality. Naturally, the QA department gets blamed when things don't go smoothly and on time. Even in newer development methodologies, QA professionals are often blamed for the bugs they find and the subsequent delays those reports create. This understandably leaves many QA professionals feeling undervalued, misunderstood and frustrated.

Meanwhile, decision makers at the company might not know what the QA department even does, what they're responsible for and why they're important. This is the core of the problem. If QA wants to be valued as a full member of the team, key stakeholders need to fully understand the process and purpose of quality assurance.

If it was that easy, though, this wouldn't be a problem to begin with. The key to communicating the full value of quality assurance is explaining QA in a way executives understand and can relate to the rest of the business. It also requires dedication on the part of your and your team.

Explain What QA Is (and Is Not)

As a quality assurance professional, you think from the company's point of

view, the customer's point of view and the point of view of a fringe user. You ask yourself if the product works as designed. You also ask if the customer will be happy with this product and if they'll find it easy to use or frustrating. Then you take it a step further and ask "what happens if I do this?" because someone, somewhere most likely will do it and it might cause a nasty bug – or worse, a security vulnerability.

This multiple personality drive is part of your DNA. But executives aren't QA professionals and don't innately think the same way you do. So explain it to them. Explain that for a product to succeed it has to work on all these levels and that while a product might work exactly as designed that doesn't mean it is a high-quality product. Software doesn't exist solely as a set of requirements, it has to function well in the hands of users and that is part of what QA is looking for.

"Checking is important, but it's mostly a confirmatory activity, verifying what we knew to be true before, or what we hope is still true, making sure that we're getting the right answers. Testing is a bigger deal, focused on finding new information, identifying new risks, asking new questions. Lots of people — managers, programmers, and even many testers — conflate testing and checking." – Michael Bolton, Principal at DevelopSense

Also explain how QA fits in with the rest of the company. You are essentially the last line of defense between the company and the customer – if you don't feel the product is ready for release then there is likely a big issue. (Remember to be reasonable, not every bug or less-than-stellar UI feature will be fixed before launch and that's OK, but you shouldn't have any major reservations.)

Ideally, a product won't be released until it meets a minimum level of quality as determined by a QA manager or team. But that might not always be the

case – launching could be up to a product owner or executive. If that's the situation at your company the best you can do is strongly make the case for QA to influence the decision. Make an argument to have QA be part of the overall product planning process. Provide metrics that show the contributions your team has made in the past (showstopper bugs, quick turnarounds, recommendations that have become features). The key is to make the case that quality assurance is just as valuable as development itself.

"Expectations can be managed once you have established a credible track record of delivering product. Here data and process are invaluable. If you can prove your points with data, then it makes it very hard to refute it, whereas hand waving just sets you up for constant failure. From a process perspective, setting up a framework so that other teams know what is required to be completed to allow the product to ship or what is the real definition of Feature Complete, for example, puts the QA team in a very defensible position." – Jim Sivak, Director of QA, Unidesk

What QA is not (and what many execs might fail to realize) is a 100% stamp of approval. Software will never be perfect and it's unrealistic to think it will be. Be sure all decision makers and executives know this. If they don't have unrealistic expectations for your department it will be easier to succeed.

Put It in Terms They Understand

If you start talking about "high priority bugs," "GUI issues, "authentication problems" and sloppy code, the executives likely won't have a clue what you're saying. These are real issues but to the CEO, CFO, marketing and other non-technical players you might as well be giving them a recipe for banana bread.

Instead of using technical terms, think about these problems in terms that are important to the executives. Explain how poor quality – or specific bugs – can affect the product and why that is important to the company as a whole (lost transactions, limiting customer access, compromising customer data, etc.). Know who you're talking to and discuss QA in relation to their major concerns. Giving stakeholders tangible results and numbers can help you communicate the importance and worth of testing in terms they understand.

"A firm grasp of the company's goals – and how progress is measured – essentially generates the vocabulary of "speaking boss." Budget requests, project plans and other communications stand a better chance of approval if expressed in terms of corporate metrics and keywords rather than technical jargon. In other words: Show, in plain language, how Project X or New Application Y will help meet corporate goals. Save the technical stuff for [QA] meetings." – Kevin Casey, Information Week

Cost

There aren't many executives that aren't concerned about the bottom line. If you can put QA in terms of cost savings you're likely to get their attention. Executives are used to digesting facts, figures, numbers and outside analysis.

If you make your case in these terms it will be much easier for them to see the "real" value.

You can make a strong argument by explaining that the cost of fixing a bug post-launch can be many times more expensive than supporting QA as a full part of the SDLC. According to an SDTimes article by Vu Lam, CEO and Founder of QASymphony, "The cost of fixing bugs increases dramatically after release … According to an IBM and Rockwell Automation study, the cost of

fixing a bug post-release can be 100x higher than if you discover it early."

Track any costs that result from bugs found post-launch. If presented correctly, this can help you make the case for more time or resources for the quality assurance department. Though it can be difficult to attach an ROI to your QA efforts, track what you can, especially when you adopt new tools or practices or make any noticeable changes to the QA process. (See sidebar for example.)

Brand Reputation

Quality has a direct impact on a brand's reputation. A recent survey commissioned by SOASTA found that 88% of Americans form a negative opinion of the overall brand when they encounter a poorly performing website or mobile app. If your company puts out a sub-par product, users will lose faith, complain and potentially take their money or membership to the competition. This is one of the Chief Marketing Officer's worst nightmares.

Because QA professionals look at products in part from a user perspective, you have a keen sense of how customers might react. Use this understanding to lay out potential pitfalls and their possible consequences in terms of brand reputation.

Releasing software updates and patches is easy these days. This can lull companies into a false sense of security and lead them to downplaying the need for in-depth QA. Remind product owners that this practice can also damage a brand's reputation. If a company is continuously releasing software

or updates that need almost immediate patching the public will quickly lose patience for the near-constant notifications and lose faith in the company's dedication to quality. It's worth the extra time to make sure a product is high-quality before release.

"A lot of people don't realize that we [companies] are evaluated on our ability to deliver on the technology front, and that technology is a major part of customer service. It fits into the customer experience, but also in our offering of a product or service. Does the technology help, or hinder? Do we have an awkward experience, or is it seamless. It also has an effect on investment and financials, even if it is indirect. A quality product and technology stack is vital to the success of a business over the long term, so we need to invest in ways to make sure that we meet our customer's needs there as well. Good quality processes, development and testing are part of that, and we ignore them at our peril." – Jon Kohl, Consultant

Efficiency

It may be necessary to remind executives of the saying "measure twice, cut once." It is rarely a company's plan to push bad software out the door and fix it later. (If that's your company's philosophy there are bigger problems than just communicating the importance of QA.)

Releasing software without proper QA means you will have to go back and fix it later, and that can have a bigger effect on company efficiency than executives might realize. Extra man hours and resources will have to be dedicated to this "done" project. This, in turn, will delay future plans. If your company is constantly releasing software that needs a considerable amount of post-launch fixing, the company is not being very efficient.

"The truth is that proper testing takes time and costs money. What many companies are missing is the fact that proper quality assurance before release is far better than disgruntled customers and repeated post-release patching. The true cost of bypassing QA or hobbling them is tough to calculate, but it could be a lot higher than you think." – Vu Lam, CEO and Founder of QASymphony (from SDTimes)

Make Sure You Understand

If you want QA to get the respect it deserves, you need to be a team player. Understand the company's dreams for this product and overall corporate goals. Just as customers won't be using the software in a bubble, you're not testing in a bubble. Figure out how QA can help make not just a better product but a better product in terms of what executives want. If you suggest changes and raise issues that have already been dismissed or that are wildly out of line with the company's goals you run the risk of alienating yourself, overstepping your bounds and devaluing your opinions in the eyes of the stake holders.

Know the Expectations

Scott Barber, Chief Technologist at PerfTestPlus, suggests drafting a mission statement that outlines the goals of QA for each project and sharing it with management. While putting together this mission statement consider who you are presenting to, what their chief concerns are likely to be and what they care most about. Let these factors influence your goals.

Presenting this mission statement before testing will help you determine if your understanding of the project is in-line with what executives want. If

your goals for testing and the desires of executives are miles apart it's better to figure that out before you spend time testing. It also opens the door for discussion. If you need to re-craft the mission statement discuss what the exec wants from QA and why you chose these goals – it could be that the true goal needs to be a combination of both inputs. Remember, the common goal is to make the best product possible.

"What doesn't work is assuming that because you are the test manager, or the tester, that you know how your testing adds value to the company, that you know what the most important testing is, and that you know the managers and executives are idiots because of what they are telling you to test. The fact is that even if your managers and executives are idiots that doesn't mean that they don't have a sound and reasonable business reason to want what they are asking for. It's not up to us to judge them for either being idiots or for making clumsy requests that don't actually help them resolve their concern. It is up to us, however, to help them figure out what they actually need, help them figure out how to meet that need, and then guide our testing to best serve that need." – Scott Barber, Chief Technologist, PerfTestPlus

Take Responsibility

Even with careful planning and even more careful testing things might not always go according to plan. Maybe you missed the mark with your testing goals, maybe the management's asks changed mid-way through testing and you didn't get the memo, maybe your team missed a major bug. Take a deep breath and take responsibility – no one respects a blame shifter.

Take responsibility for mistakes that were truly your fault. Form a plan to keep the mistake from happening again and discuss it with your team so everyone is on board. Then bring your acknowledgment that something went wrong and

plan of action directly with your immediate supervisor and to any executives you have a working relationship with.

If it wasn't your fault, don't just point the finger at someone else. Acknowledge that the ball was dropped, explain why you think that happened and suggest a way to keep it from happening again. If you want the QA department to be an equal member of the team, you need to show the powers that be that you're a team player.

Stick Up For Your Team

You, just like every other department leader, know your team best. You know how they work, the methods and practices that work best and what really annoys people. Be polite, but don't be afraid to voice your needs, opinions and concerns when dealing with management.

"I think test managers should evangelize and defend what works well in practice on their teams." – Lanette Creamer, Director of Quality, Silicon Publishing

Don't whine or rush off to the CEO when there's an issue, but don't be afraid to address it with the appropriate person. Nothing will change unless you draw attention to a problem.

If management doesn't feel production is going as smoothly as possible they may try to make blind changes. Everyone has heard horror stories about companies implementing "Agile" simply because they heard it produces faster results. If you disagree when a major change gets passed down ask to discuss the change and the reasons behind it. Bring a list of reasons you think it is

the wrong direction for your team. If management is seeking a change don't expect them to backpedal simply because you say it's a bad idea. Instead, listen to the source of their grievances and you may be able to address them in a less disruptive way that will result in real benefits.

"Bite the hand that feeds you (a little): Don't be a jerk, but make sure you don't go passively along with bad ideas. A weak willed tester is a bad thing. Make your concerns known … and know when to fold." – Patrick Copeland, Sr. Engineering Director, Google

Conclusion

In the end, you're still just talking to a boss. It doesn't matter that you're in quality assurance, it all boils down to a boss-employee or executive-department relationship. Don't get so caught up in what you're doing that you forget the fundamentals of communication all together. No one likes to be talked down to and no one likes feeling dumb. If you go in acting condescending, demanding and spouting tech jargon you're going to put management on the defensive.

Follow common-sense communication guidelines, such as using the boss' preferred method of communication (i.e. emails, weekly in-person meetings, phone). Don't just point out problems, offer solutions. Even if the developers are complaining about QA, don't rise to the bait. You're adults so act like it and take the high road (it will make you look better). Be honest and as accurate as possible when giving your analysis and opinions.

If you're not happy with how QA is treated at your company it's up to you to change it. The best way to do that is to start a good rapport with management and prove to them that QA is an indispensable part of the business (in ways that make sense to them).

About Applause

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Applause delivers unmatched in-the-wild testing, user feedback and research solutions by utilizing its DX platform to manage communities around the world. This provides brands with the real-world insights they need to achieve omni-channel success across demographics, locations, devices and operating systems that match their user base.

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