

Vanguard Articles - A passion for quality

If quality is concerned with changing behaviour, why do we leave so much to chance? Organisations need to design into their TQM programmes the means for people to tackle and solve quality problems.

The road to Total Quality Management (TQM) is littered with failures. Hundreds of organisations have tried to implement TQM, but few have reaped its full benefits. What separates the TQM winners from their less successful counterparts? Total Quality Management demands a clear focus on the customer and total commitment throughout the organisation. It means defining quality in customer terms; it means making each employee responsible for quality; it means management commitment to supporting that responsibility; and it means a continuous quest for quality improvement. There should never be a point at which people say, 'Well, we've achieved quality; now we can get on to something else.' Achieving this state of TQM requires nothing less than a culture change for most organisations.

A systems approach to TQM

Most TQM programmes focus on the goals, objectives, and tasks required to improve quality. Quality experts, such as Crosby, Deming, and Juran, promote a logical, rational approach to quality improvement. There can be no doubt that their ideas make sense, and have produced excellent results in many organisations. There is also little doubt that many, if not most, quality programmes either take a long time to get going, never get going fully, or disappear after the first flush of enthusiasm.

Let's take a look at what seems to happen with most quality programmes. Typically, senior management announce the major quality goals. Objectives based on these goals are then developed and embraced, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by groups and individuals throughout the organisation. The focus on quality is often institutionalised by the creation of committees designed to promote and support the quality initiative. Once the goals and structure are in place, TQM programmes typically establish and introduce systems for guiding and measuring quality improvement. Other systems may be put in place for such purposes as identification of project teams, training, communication and approval of objectives and initiatives and other support functions. Along with these systems, TQM programmes try to generate a sense of urgency, even passion, for quality. By raising quality to the highest priority and using promotional activities, TQM proponents hope to create the enthusiasm and awareness that will bring about the desired 'culture change'. An analysis of TQM programmes indicates that during the early stages response to the programme is usually strong:

The initial introduction of the quality initiative is generally well received. People see a need to improve and feel empowered to tackle issues in their areas.

The systematic analysis of a unit's work performance that is part of the programme is usually highly valued. It provides improved clarity and useful insights concerning inputs, processes and outputs of the work.

A flurry of documentation is generated around the decision making and communication structures established for the TQM effort.

After a period of time, however, most TQM programmes seem to hit a plateau and then a falling-off of activity: People begin to let problems and opportunities for improvement pass. Many of them seem to be 'someone else's' problem.

Employees on quality committees begin to question their roles and the effectiveness of their efforts. They start to view committee attendance as ceremonial, rather than substantive.

Organisational leaders pay less active attention to the drive for quality improvement. For some, it is simply due to the reduced number of staged quality events; they begin to 'forget about it'. For others; quality - as they perceive it to be defined through the programme - was never valued highly. One begins to hear comments like, 'The only reason the product was shipped on time was because it didn't have 'quality' inflicted on it!'

People not directly involved in quality projects see less evidence that quality improvement is valued. They begin to describe it as 'last year's flavour' and join in fuelling rumours that it's on the way out; the organisation is back to the old way of doing things-or waiting for next year's flavour.

These are generalisations, of course, and there are glowing exceptions, but in virtually every study of quality programmes we find the TQM initiative up against the traditional culture of the organisation - and overcome by it more often than not. TQM is about behaviour change throughout an organisation, and all too often that change takes far too long to occur, and/or reverts to the old way all too soon. It can be suggested that the problem is not with the value of the experts' ideas and techniques, but with the way in which TQM programmes often approach organisational behaviour change.

The organisational integrity model

What is lacking in many quality programmes is an effective balance between the goals and tasks of achieving quality and organisational values and behaviours. In part, this imbalance stems from the relative ease of gathering information about such 'hard' measures as product performance and costs of production, as compared with 'soft' measures like customer perceptions and employee commitment. The key to the kind of change that results in a fully integrated quality effort is balanced attention to what is to be done (e.g., reduce time and costs of getting a product ready for market) as well as how it is done (e.g., co-operation and open communication between sales, marketing and manufacturing). That is, the goals and objectives of the programme must be integrated with, and supported by, the culture of the organisation.

There appear to be two key characteristics of behaviour patterns that are culture-based:

- Group-wide. Almost everyone in a group exhibits the behaviour pattern. This means that there will be prevailing norms, expectations and rewards that support the behaviour - and often 'punishment' for behaviour that does not fit. It is difficult, then, for people to change culturally-determined behaviour unless the environment changes to support the new behaviour - and the behaviour of others around them also changes.

- Value-driven. There is usually an underlying set of beliefs that supports a given culture-based behaviour. It can thus be difficult to effectively change some behaviours, because they may be in conflict with personal beliefs and expectations. It becomes important, then, to clearly examine and articulate both values and behaviour and gain shared understanding of them. Occasionally, this may lead to a rejection of new behaviours and the values they represent; much more often the articulation of values helps people embrace new behaviours.

Often, plans go awry not because the ideas are poor, but because those who must carry out the plan have behaviour patterns which are in conflict with the overall intent. In this case it is as important to examine the values and behaviour patterns of people as it is to analyse the tasks they perform. It is balanced attention to values as well as goals which will drive the 'culture change' required for long-term success of TQM programmes. Use of an integrated organisational model which incorporates both components can be an effective tool in guiding the implementation of such programmes.

The integrity model outlines two complementary and interdependent paths for providing direction - for helping people move from the global, abstract statement of an organisational mission to specific, concrete organisational results.

The left-hand path focuses primarily on what needs to be done: the broad strategic goals the organisation will work towards in support of its mission; the objectives that units and individuals must accomplish to fulfil those strategies; and the tasks or activities that must be performed to meet goals and objectives. The right-hand path focuses primarily on how it should be done: the organisational values implied by the mission statement; the specific practices which underlie those values; and the individual behaviours which will demonstrate or represent the values and practices to customers, suppliers and other employees.

Organisations have traditionally emphasised the left-hand path; considerable time and effort often go into defining strategies, goals and tasks. Relatively few organisations have clearly defined, overt statements of value, however, and still fewer have made the effort to define the behaviours that represent those values. Both strategies and values are important in providing direction and contributing to organisational success. In recent years, with increasing competition and diminishing differences among organisations in their technology and products, the 'values side' of the model has assumed increasing importance. When customers perceive relatively little difference among companies' products, they begin to place increasing importance on how those products are delivered.

The organisational integrity model in practice

Mission, strategies, and values represent organisational intent or direction. They serve to provide guidance about:

- What the organisation is in business to do (mission) How it intends to allocate its resources to accomplish the mission (strategies) How it intends to behave in executing strategies (values)

'It is balanced attention to values as well as goals which will drive the "culture change" required for long term success of TQM'

For example: Here is a mission statement for a hypothetical financial services organisation: 'We provide products and services to business customers that assist them in making well-informed, timely financial decisions.'

That statement provides broad guidance to management decision makers and others about choices of strategies, markets, products, services, etc.

Such a mission statement might be supported by strategic goals, such as these: 'To provide a full line of financial services to small and mid-size organisations.' 'To gain a competitive edge through top-quality customer service.'

These provide further guidance to people in the organisation about the kinds of objectives they should set, and the tasks they should be performing about where they should be allocating resources and investing their time and effort.

In addition, the organisation can make statements about the kinds of values it holds, such as this: 'We provide our services by working in partnership with our customers, freely sharing information, ideas, and goals.'

Mission, value and strategy statements thus serve to tell people 'what we are about', and to guide members of the organisation in setting priorities and choosing how to behave.

Tasks and behaviours are the execution of intent; the determinants of organisational performance. These represent what really happens in an organisation: the kinds of tasks people choose to perform and the way they behave as they perform those tasks. Statements of mission, values or strategies are meaningful only insofar as they are translated into action.

For example: A strategic goal to build a competitive-edge through customer service becomes reality when people throughout the organisation effectively engage in tasks related to such things as identifying high-priority customer needs and delivering and supporting products and services in a way that meets or exceeds customer expectations.

A value of partnership becomes reality when people engage in such behaviours as providing full and accurate information about products and services to customers; making commitments only when they fully intend to meet them; and working jointly with customers to identify needs and mutual goals.

Support systems, structures, and policies function as organisational 'performance levers' that support (or hinder) people in carrying out the tasks and behaviours required to implement strategies and values. These include such factors as formal and informal reward and recognition systems; information and measurement systems; performance appraisal, compensation and benefits; design of the physical environment; organisational structure and reporting relationships; training and development: job definition and work design; and administrative policies.

For example: Compensation systems for sales people that focus exclusively on bringing in orders or reaching revenue targets can lead to violating values about how the organisation wants to treat its customers, as well as violating strategic goals for penetration of selected markets.

Similarly, centralised control policies designed to ensure task efficiency can hinder innovation and responsiveness to customer needs unless those policies allow some flexibility, and are balanced by reward systems or other factors supporting responsiveness to customers.

Organisational performance is the outcome or results produced by an organisation as a function of the tasks and behaviours performed. These can be measured in a variety of ways, e.g., financial indicators, product/service measures, customer satisfaction and retention, sales measures, employee and customer attitude surveys, measures of market share, etc.

The ways in which an organisation chooses to measure its performance will determine its ability to 'stay on track' and will influence its ability to develop support systems and policies that are in line with values and strategies.

Implications for TQM programmes

The key implication of the organisational integrity model for TQM programmes lies in its contribution to building commitment and responsiveness through a combined focus on goals and values and to achieving the goals through detailed systems focusing primarily on goals and tasks. When quality goals are not achieved, the response is often to create still more detailed systems. Yet, the heart of a successful quality effort is responsiveness to customer needs. Procedures alone cannot accomplish this - and the more detailed they become, the more likely they are to defeat the intent of serving the customer. In a dynamic environment with multiple and changing customer needs, people need flexibility and the ability to make appropriate decisions based on the conditions they face. When they have a clear understanding of goals, and shared values about how those goals will be met, they can do so far more effectively than when they are constrained by procedural requirements.

'Getting quality to work in any organisation means getting people to change the way they behave'

Leadership requires an understanding of the quality improvement process. Even more important, it requires clear direction and demonstrated commitment to both organisational goals and values.

In order to develop the commitment, trust and 'can do' attitude that can make TQM programmes outstanding successes, senior management must be seen to model the values of the organisation in their own behaviour.

Yearly quality objectives should be set according to the market-place. All too often organisations set goals by looking first at resources and constraints.

Far better to look first at customer needs and possibilities - and then make every effort to allocate and support the resources to achieve them. Executive steering committees can best support a quality programme when they recognise that their role is to support and empower people - not to control and limit them. The steering arm guides by establishing the direction, priorities and resources. The diagnostic arm needs the investigative skills and mobility to follow the trail wherever it leads until the root cause is identified.

Experience has shown that quality improvement is faster where training is selective and with a purpose, rather than training everybody top to bottom. Much of the money spent on training in service organisations is wasted. In general, the front-line staff have most of the skills and knowledge needed to do a good job serving the customer. Most often it is the customer service managers and supervisors who need the training. It is their values, practices, and behaviour which will most influence the success or failure in satisfying the customer.

They are the ones who can create an environment that frees front-line service people to respond to customers in a way that meets needs, and supports organisational goals and values. The organisational integrity approach to TQM can produce exceptional results. Many organisations need five to 10 years to produce the 'culture change' necessary to establish a quality environment. Our experience suggests that this is possible within three months-for an organisation of 100 people, and as short a time as four years for an organisation of 40,000.

Quality improvement depends on people changing

Getting quality to work in any organisation means getting people to change the way they behave. When a quality programme is first introduced the attention to goals, structure, and systems produces some short-term changes as people 'honeymoon' with a fresh perspective on the organisation. The early seminars and visibility of top management reinforce the honeymoon ardour. However, the initial interest generated by the programme dwindles as the quality movement becomes slowly subsumed in the traditional organisational norms.

If quality is concerned with changing behaviour, why do we leave so much to chance? Of course, changes in goals, structures and systems will have an impact on behaviour, but they can also limit it. We need to design the means to encourage people to want to tackle quality, to know how to tackle quality and to-help others in their efforts to tackle quality.

Just as there is an architecture for goals, structures and systems, there should also be an architecture for developing new norms and associated practices. The norms are key operating beliefs or principles built around values, such as teamwork and creating value for customers. The practices are behavioural examples, such as freely sharing information that others in the organisation need.

When these kinds of values and behaviours are articulated by the organisation, modelled by managers, and recognised and rewarded, they can support people in developing and acting on a genuine passion for quality.

Passion should not be left to chance. Having defined a set of behavioural practices, managerial feedback systems and development seminars can then be developed based on data about behaviour and how it is perceived.

There is no better way to develop and reinforce new attitudes and behaviour than to give people an opportunity to see how others see them and determine what they can do to make a personal contribution to the quality process.

This database, established through many individual perceptions of the performance of others, can also be treated as an organisational performance database. Organisations can benefit in two ways:

The database can be used to determine empirical relationships between items. From such an analysis perspectives on the organisation's performance can be used to headline development activities.

An overall picture of performance can be used to initiate new performance management systems which will institutionalise the new practices.

So often the cliché 'our people are our most important asset' is heard. If this is the case, we should pay at least as much attention to designing the means for changes we seek in people's behaviours as we do to designing the more traditional aspects of a quality improvement programme.