

# Curing Quality Program-itis

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It was June 24, 1980. America was getting its first good glimpse of Dr. W. Edwards Deming in an NBC network television documentary called "If Japan Can, Why Can't We?" Most business people were mildly curious, but hardly overwhelmed. They were too busy plotting their next takeover scheme—or defending against one.

A few companies, though, moved beyond curiosity, and took action. Some of them eventually attracted considerable attention for their performance improvement efforts—companies like Ford, Xerox, Motorola, and others that since have led the way in spawning a virtual movement in this country under the ubiquitous rallying cry of "Total Quality Management."

As an example of how TQM has swept through the U.S. business community, Westinghouse reportedly was the only company in the Fortune 500 with a vice president of quality in 1979. That number now has jumped to more than 300.

The response to the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, instituted in 1987 by an act of Congress, is another indication of the growing interest in TQM. While the number of actual applicants for the award remains relatively small, the number of requests for the application guidelines has grown dramatically, from 12,000 the first year to more than 210,000 in 1991.

TQM clearly has stirred a lot of excitement in the U.S.; and certainly, noticeable gains have come from the increased attention that some American companies have paid to their operations in the name of quality. They've been well publicized, too, partly due to the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

Unfortunately, that is less than half the story. In reality, the number of companies that are *struggling* with TQM far outnumber those *succeeding* with it. In fact, more than 11 years after Deming's first appearance on nationwide television, American business as a whole still is losing substantial ground to foreign competition, and signs of tarnish are beginning to show around the edges of TQM.

Not only has TQM failed to deliver on its stirring promise, but as more and more companies are hopping on the quality bandwagon without a clear sense of what is involved, many of them are slipping under the wheels and getting hurt in the process.

To make matters worse, we simply don't want to face the facts in this country. It hurts to think that the U.S. is surrendering its dominant economic superiority, and we're stuck in denial, grasping at the straws of a few inconsequential victories as "evidence" of an economic recovery trend.

About a year and a half ago when I was still Director of Communications for Pet Incorporated, I gave a speech to the joint membership of IABC (International Association of Business Communicators) and PRSA

(Public Relations Society of America) in St. Louis. Pet was struggling with a quality effort at the time, but I was unswerving in my declaration that TQM was here to stay, and anyone who didn't get on board by the year 2000 would perish. I also asserted that the opportunities for communicators in TQM were enormous.

Now, after talking and listening further to people involved with "total quality" across the country—from greenhorns to "gurus," from colleges to corporations—it's clear that something is seriously amiss. And communicators, ironically, are playing a significant role in creating that dilemma.

The chorus of disenchantment across the country is intensifying by the day, and quality experts are sounding the alarm loudest of all.

"We ain't gettin' the job done," was the colloquial warning from C. Jackson Grayson, chairman of the American Productivity and Quality Center, at last year's "Communicating Quality" symposium in Baltimore. "We're still being driven by fear and crisis; we're still using the wrong reward systems; we're still using the old management styles of control and command. We're getting lots of language, awareness, and exhortation, but very little substantive action."

Quality expert Philip Crosby is highly critical of the quality consulting industry that's springing up in response to cries from desperate companies around the country. "It's about 85 percent foolishness," he said.

One of those consultants, Thomas Hout of the Boston Consulting Group, acknowledged in a recent special *Business Week* issue called the "Quality Imperative" that "The majority of quality efforts fizzle out early, or give some improvements but never fulfill their initial promise."

About the Malcolm Baldrige Award, Crosby says critically that it "rewards all the quality control stuff that got us into trouble in the first place." The cover story in the February 1991 issue of *Training* magazine, called "Bashing the Baldrige," quotes numerous people around the country who echo his sentiment.

And what about Deming? A little over a year ago, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter asked him what he thought about the future of the American workplace. Deming's response was short and not so sweet. "What future?" he said.

It would be misleading to suggest that all of the quality experts are singing out of the same hymn book. They're not. Still, all of them seem to be of a mind on one critical point. Quality efforts in American business as a whole are in serious trouble. If you look at the data, it's easy to see their point. Here are just a few examples:

- Numbers compiled by the American Productivity and Quality center indicate that while the U.S. is still the most productive nation on earth in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), we'll be tied for second by the year 2000 and fall to fifth place by 2005 if we continue at our present anemic rate of productive growth.
- Data compiled by Technical Research Assistance Programs, Inc. (TARP) show that in spite of our emphasis on "total" customer satisfaction, the rate of "Customer Problem Experiences" in their surveys currently runs from a low of 26 percent in financial services to a high of 53 percent in telecommunications.
- In terms of TQM effectiveness, several sources indicate a consistent lack of confidence in the process:
  - In a recent Conference Board study, the number of manufacturing companies reporting that they are "very/extremely satisfied" with "progress toward involving employees in TQM" is about 25 percent compared to an almost equal number (23 percent) who are "somewhat/not at all satisfied."
  - A survey conducted on "employee attitudes toward jobs and quality improvement programs" by the Gallup Organization for the American Society of Quality Control shows similar assessments from

employee ranks. While 29 percent of employees are very satisfied with their quality processes, 25 percent expressed dissatisfaction, figures similar to those found in the Conference Board survey.

- The Gallup/ASQC study also shows that employees across the country report considerable disparity between what their companies *say* is important and how those companies actually follow through:
  - On “showing the customers we’re committed to quality,” 53 percent say it’s important; 35 percent follow through.
  - On “making quality everyone’s top priority.” 53 percent say it’s important; 36 percent follow through.
- Another telling finding from the Gallup/ASQC study reveals just how far apart management and employees are on the TQM notion of “empowerment.”
  - While 66 percent of employees report being asked to be involved in decision-making, only 14 percent report being given complete responsibility to do so.
- In perhaps the greatest indictment of all, American Quality Foundation President Joshua Hammond observed in an interview for *Business Week*’s special issue on quality that their findings show, “70 percent of American workers are afraid to speak up with suggestions or to ask for clarification.”

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that people won’t do their best work in an intimidating environment. Still, if people ever needed reminding, one of Deming’s basic “14 Points” for quality improvement is, “Drive out fear.” And yet more than a decade after we launched the “quality express” in this country, the vast majority of workers are still too frightened to speak upon even the most basic issues in their companies. That’s not merely a problem; it’s a national disgrace.

What’s wrong, anyway? We wrote the book on quality in this country. Where did we get off the track, and more importantly, why are we having so much trouble getting performance rolling again in this country? A good place to begin the search is by looking more closely at the principles of TQM themselves.

### Principles of TQM

It’s important to recognize that the principles associated with TQM today are not revolutionary concepts. This country has produced some brilliant management theorists—Scalon, Drucker, and McGregor to name a few—whose work has encompassed for decades most of what we now ascribe to the “quality gurus.”

Let’s take a closer look at some of the basic principles commonly associated with TQM:

- Customer-driven orientation
- Continuous improvement
- Individual decision-making authority
- Employee involvement
- Strong, visible leadership
- Total management commitment
- *Building* quality into the *process*, rather than *inspecting* it into the *product*
- Effective team-building

- Reward quality behavior
- Continuous training and education
- Statistical, verifiable measurements as the basis for decision-making
- Freedom from fear without management intimidation
- Extensive, open and honest communications
- Long-term perspective
- And so on ... and so on ... and ...

Isn't it a little odd that U.S. companies are looking at many of those principles as though they were revolutionary concepts? Isn't it remarkable that it took "gurus" to show us the importance of such fundamental notions? True, some of the technical aspects of SPC, for example, may have been unfamiliar to most of American business. But a strong case could be made that all of those principles fall into one or both of two basic categories:

1. Nothing new, i.e., principles that have *always* been evident in effective organizations;
2. Just plain common sense.

In his presentation in Baltimore, Jack Grayson acknowledged that the fundamental nature of TQM by suggesting that we drop the Q and just call it Total Management. If we want those principles to be, "just the way we do things around here," perhaps the T and M should be dropped as well.

Quality consultant Brian Joiner of Joiner Associates Inc. was quoted in the *Business Week* article as saying that, "Quality is too narrow a name for what we are talking about now." He now refers to the process as "fourth generation management."

In mistakenly believing that TQM and its principles constituted a revolutionary breakthrough, and in saying things like "quality is here to stay," we've missed a crucial fundamental point:

**What business has to sell in the final analysis is not quality, but goods and services.**

That oversight, in part, has led to a huge dilemma for American business. We have created such a hoopla around "total quality" that it has become *the* thing to be promoted and improved, instead of the processes that organizations are using and the products and services they deliver.

### **Quality "program-itis"**

While there's no single or simple answer to the quality morass we've created, one factor continues to emerge as a major contributor to the quality quandary:

**Most organizations attempting to implement performance improvement efforts are suffering from varying degrees of quality "program-itis" for which the recommended treatment is an immediate "program-ectomy."**

While asserting their commitment to permanent system-wide change, many companies are stuck in a trap of "quality campaigns" that function like adjuncts to regular business affairs, instead of instituting basic new improvement processes that are integral components of day-to-day activities.

If we ever hope to institute continuous, ongoing performance improvement as a way of life, we have to understand a fundamental imperative that American business, thus far, has seemed unwilling or unable to appreciate:

**Success is directly proportionate to an organization's ability to weave improvement efforts into the basic fabric of day-to-day business ... in a way that those efforts are utterly indistinguishable from "just the way we do things around here."**

### What is quality?

Ask any 20 people for their definition of quality, and you're likely to come up with 21 different answers. A few common definitions on today's quality lexicon include:

- Reliability
- Consistency
- Peak productivity
- Communication
- Absence of variation
- Conformance to specifications
- Zero defects
- Doing the right things right the first time
- Total customer satisfaction

Following Jack Grayson's presentation in Baltimore last year, someone mentioned that his comments called to mind another definition for quality — *the systematic application of common sense* — an important observation and a concept that seems to escape many TQM-bound companies in this country.

But the definition with the most far-reaching implications for me comes from a recently published book called *The Age of Unreason*. In it, author Charles Handy takes a broad look at several critical issues confronting the world as we approach the end of the 20th century. One is the nature of organizations. In his discussion of that topic, he devotes a brief section to quality, stating that, "*quality is truth*."

The relevance of quality as it relates to truth is especially significant in the context of the work of Dr. David Berlo, a psychologist by training who is one of the founders of the academic field of communication and its application to management and marketing.

In a presentation entitled, "The Eternal Quest for Perfection," which he delivered last year at the national conference of the Society for Human Resource Management, he observed that, "Telling the truth is not necessarily the same as not lying. Truth is a matter of *content*; lying is a matter of *intent*." It's quite possible, for example, to tell an untruth without intending to deceive. Among other things, that's what we mean when we say that someone doesn't know what he's talking about.

American business has suffered from decision-making based on "untruths" like that for a long time. Management may not have intended to lie, but what they said often didn't make sense because it wasn't based on the facts. And employees know it.

That's one reason why people who use "statistical process control" (SPC) have found it very appealing. Decisions are based on data, information, and knowledge, i.e., truth, not management whim or intimidation. Recognizing the value of data-based management, at least two major U.S. companies—Xerox and Southwestern Bell—now refer to the way they intend to operate as "management by fact."

### **"Avoiding the show"**

There's another vital dimension to the premise that "quality is truth"—one that's especially relevant to the communications profession and the role of *promoter* we've typically played in most organizations.

American business loves "the show," at least in part because communicators have sold them on it as a way to get the attention of employees and motivate them to perform according to management wishes. That's why so many "quality programs" start off with a whiz-bang and sizzle. Why not? After all, it's better than twisting their arms, isn't it? Maybe not.

Ironically, companies employ promotional techniques as though they were inherent in the quality process itself when, in fact, just the opposite is true. Hype not only is ineffective as a performance improvement tool, it often does more damage than good, especially when it's applied to something that's supposed to be an integral part of an organization's routine business affairs—like quality.

Among other negative consequences, employees just don't respond to it very well or very long. They've experienced too many management kicks before, and they're skeptical and cynical in spite of management's apparent sense of urgency and commitment to a "new way for a new day." They see it as just another passing fancy.

Most companies are well aware of the cynicism and resentment that the "program-of-the-month" syndrome breeds among employees. Yet in spite of their sincerest efforts to avoid it, they continue to slip into the seductive trap of banners, mugs, logos, themes, pep rallies, campaigns and a host of other artifacts that send an unmistakable signal to employees: "Here comes another management program. Let's see how long this one lasts."

There's another danger to "the show." When it's time to bring down the curtain—which is inevitable even for the longest running production—people usually are left with a feeling of failure to varying degrees.

It seems that few companies have given much more serious thought to the long-term consequences of the "quality productions" than they've given to substantive long-term considerations of their businesses as a whole.

- What happens when the new quality publication eventually fades away?
- How will people react when the word "quality" no longer appears in the middle of a printed sentence with a capital Q?
- What will employees think three years from now ... or four ... or five ... or ten ... when the company decides it no longer needs a Quality Mission Statement?

If the company is lucky, the worst thing they get from employees is, "So what? We didn't expect it to last, anyway." If they're not so lucky, people can become deeply resentful.

The ultimate question, of course, that very few companies have considered adequately is this: *How do we eventually transform "the show" into a basic way of life, into "just the way we do things around here?"* Perhaps

that transformation simply can't be made. Maybe the best answer is to avoid the show altogether.

### **Avoiding "the sell and seduction"**

The razzmatazz also signals something else very unsavory to employees—that they can't be counted on to embrace new methods to improve performance without being "seduced" into it. Management thinks they have to sell employees on improving the organization—as though employees weren't intrinsically interested in making contributions that ultimately would improve their own lot in life. So people get subjected to all manner of promotional nonsense in the name of building "esprit de corps."

Management's intention often is innocent and understandable enough. They want to get the attention of employees and convince them that the organization is serious about its commitment to "total quality"—perhaps implying unintentionally that they weren't really serious about what they were doing before.

Instead of rallying the troops, though, management comes off looking like they have a Mary Poppins complex, treating employees like children, trying to slip them a "spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down." People don't want nannies for managers, and the hype is jeopardizing the thin thread of trust that exists already between management and employees in many companies. Unfortunately, professional communicators are slipping right into the trap, and in many cases, they're even helping to set it.

"Selling is lying when you're doing it to teammates," says Berlo. External stimulation and motivation suggests that you have to induce the behavior you desire, and if you're doing that with people on your own team, eventually they're going to get tired of it, and it's going to backfire on you.

You don't need the sell and the show if you operate on the premise that quality is truth. You only need that kind of inducement when the truth isn't good enough to sell itself, and you don't have anything better to offer.

### **Where do we go from here?**

Bottom line, the TQM dilemma cannot be resolved by invoking truth—or any other word—as a new definition for quality. In the final analysis, any definition for quality, anything that completes the sentence "Quality is ..." perpetuates the program trap—even a definition as elemental as truth—because it creates a language about quality that's separate and distinct from "just the way we do things around here."

The solution lies in a deeper understanding and more consistent application of numerous factors which encompass both general management and specific communications issues.

### **General management considerations**

- **Eliminate quality bureaucracy.**

It may be viable, even valuable, to establish a vice president of quality or similar position to aid in instituting performance improvement processes. But two things have to be clear from the outset.

First, the termination date for the position and any related department functions must be established before the position is filled—preferably no longer than three years.

Second, the function should be strictly supportive and instructive, not promotional. Otherwise, it just becomes part of the show.

In many organizations, the quality bureaucracy that gets created to support performance improvement

efforts winds up becoming another departmental organism searching for every opportunity to continue its survival.

The chairman of Florida Power & Light—this country's only winner of Japan's Deming Prize—wrote to employees about a year and a half ago that the company's "preoccupation with [the quality] process has resulted in our losing sight of one of the major tenets of quality improvement, namely, respect for employees ... [and] there is less recognition for making good business decisions than for following the QI PROCESS."

In a subsequent memo to employees a couple of months later, he announced the dismantling of FPL's quality bureaucracy and the reassignment of all but six of the 150 individuals in the quality improvement department to regular operating positions.

- **Support people; don't try to "motivate" them.**

There's only one kind of motivation, and that's self-motivation. By and large, people are intrinsically motivated to do work that they find personally satisfying ... and they like to do it well. There's a more appropriate name for positive external motivators designed to stimulate specified behaviors in people—seduction. It might feel good at first, but ultimately it breeds a sense of manipulation and resentment.

The next time you feel the urge to "motivate your people," remember two important warnings offered by David Berlo.

First, don't waste your time, because you can't motivate people. Fortunately, though, they already come that way.

Second, unless you've taken in slaves, or God has taken you in as a partner, they're not your people. They're competent, caring, independent adult human beings. Treat them that way.

- **Lead by example, not mandate or mesmerism.**

The understanding and endorsement of the top guy or gal in any organizational change effort is essential. But too much mandating or mesmerizing from the top can create suspicion and second-guessing among employees. As a result, they spend more time trying to figure out how to make the boss happy instead of how to exhibit individual leadership and personal initiative in improving performance.

In the kind of leadership roles that many TQM companies have carved out for the top guy, he may see himself as a knight in shining armor on a white steed leading the charge to the promised land. Unfortunately, employees often see him mounted on a cow pony at the head of a cattle drive ... and they're the cattle.

People respond best to leadership that provides vision and cooperative game planning, not inducements and predetermined mandates, however nicely they may be cloaked in the guise of giving people "what's good for them."

*Harvard Business Review* published an article in their November-December 1990 issue called "Why Change Programs Don't Produce Change." In it, the authors state that, "The most effective senior managers in our study recognized their limited power to mandate corporate renewal from the top. Instead, they defined their roles as creating a climate for change, then spreading the lessons of both successes and failures. Put another way, they specified the general direction in which the company should move without insisting on specific solutions."



- **Establish anticipatory joint game-planning.**

That increasing pace of change and range of environmental variables facing organizations today makes effective long-term planning difficult at best. One plan just isn't enough. It can be out of date before it gets back from the printer. Effective planning for the future means effective anticipation of various potential scenarios, followed by full-blown action plans for each of those scenarios that can be implemented on a moment's notice, regardless of which one actually occurs.

It's a time-consuming process up front, but it helps to avoid the tremendous anxiety and faulty decision-making which often occur in the midst of a crisis.

It's also important to ensure that everyone in the organization plays a part in the planning process and is aware of what the various plans are. On a well-coached team, every person knows the game plan and precisely what his or her role is supposed to be. That's as true in business as it is on the sports field.

- **Look for problems in systems, not in people.**

While much of the difficulty in organizations today, indeed, does reside within people and their feelings about themselves and the organizations they work for, much of the problem is rooted in the systems within which employees have to work.

Depending on which quality expert you talk to, only five to 15 percent of the problems in most companies are due directly to errors from the work force. The other 85 to 95 percent come from poor management and poor systems. Seek out those problems and fix them.

- **Be customer-sensitive, not customer-driven.**

Customers are the most essential part of any business mix, but they're seldom the most informed. Virtually every important innovation in American business has come from within organizations, not from customer suggestions. While concern for the customer must be paramount in any successful enterprise, a company that allows itself to be "driven" by its customers isn't going to stay on the cutting edge of the industry for long.

Customers also like being surprised—as long as it's a surprise they know they'll like. In fact, that's one of the primary tenets espoused by "total customer satisfaction" devotees. They're committed to delighting customers—actually surprising them with the level of quality and service they receive. If you're "driving" the bus, it's hard to be surprised about your destination.

Customers also sometimes say one thing, then do something altogether different. A number of successful companies here and abroad now are observing customers actually using their products and services rather than asking customers about their reaction to those products and services. They find that adjustments made through observation of behavior are much more likely to satisfy the customers than those based on opinion surveys.

- **Establish knowledge as the basis for control, not power.**

Most TQMers stress the importance of establishing greater individual decision-making authority at all levels of the organization. Some people mistakenly refer to that principle as "empowerment."

Berlo points out that, "Power in any form at any level is the wrong basis for decision-making and control." He explains that the only viable source of control is organized information, otherwise known as knowledge. "Whoever possesses the relevant knowledge should make the controlling decisions, regard-

less of their rank in the organization,” he says. “Whether or not the organization shares power isn’t really very relevant to effective management.”

- **Use data-based performance measurement criteria.**

Regardless of which quadrant of the fishbone chart you’re evaluating—manpower, machinery, methods, or materials—the best way to be sure that you’re speaking the truth and making sense is to use data-based measurements.

Don’t tell a secretary that one of your performance criteria for her is to “Answer phones promptly.” By whose standards? Instead, describe the behavior you want as specifically as possible: “Answer phones before the third ring more than 60 percent of the time.” If she agrees and you agree, you’ve got a deal. You also have a reliable way of determining whether or not the deal is being kept. If it’s not, the data can be useful in helping to determine the source of the problem.

Displaying the data on charts also can help performance. No one likes to watch a trend line going down, and making it publicly visible keeps it on the front burner for people.

- **Guard against divisiveness from religious fervor.**

Invariably in organizations where a TQM effort is being implemented you hear people asking questions like, “Is he on board?” or “Why doesn’t she get with the program?” When that happens, a lot of good, well meaning, hard-working people can begin to feel alienated, and organizations wind up creating camps of the “converted” and “non-converted.”

There is a characteristic smugness about some people who are deep devotees of TQM. They contend that it will work anywhere that people are “truly committed” to it. That’s simply not true. A great number of well-intentioned and competent people in companies all across the country are putting a great deal of time, energy, and money into quality improvement efforts.

Unfortunately, much of it is misguided, partly because of how we’re interpreting and applying some of the basic principles of TQM, and partly because of the religious fervor associated with it.

There’s one thing that everyone wants that requires no conversion—and that’s improvement. No one needs to get religion in order to “get on board” with the goal to simply improve performance by working together more effectively. Getting religion is necessary only if people feel there’s but one true faith, and the organization has no room for those who don’t practice it.

- **Establish appropriate reward systems.**

Don’t tell people you want one kind of behavior, then reward something else. If your primary goal is the long-term health of the organization, don’t reward quarterly sales results. In fact, don’t reward results at all. Instead, reward performance—the way the results are achieved.

Berlo says, “Rewarding results in the long run invariably leads to a deterioration in the quality of both performance and results.” He points out that occasionally you get a good result in spite of a bad performance and vice versa. If you reward people for results, you’ll reinforce the bad behavior that leads to the occasional good result, and you’ll discourage the good behavior that leads to the occasional bad result. Either way, everyone loses.

Winning is important, of course, or we wouldn't keep score. But if your eye is constantly focused on the goal line, you can't concentrate very well on what you need to do to get there. So as Berlo says, "If production is your goal, strive for results, but pay for performance."

- **Promote continuous training and education.**

Companies are beginning to recognize the bottom-line value of training, but they seldom offer much education. If you want to put more into people so that you can get more of what you want out of them—then give them training. If you want to put more into people so that they can get more out of themselves—then give them education.

Organizations need both, but they often don't know which one to use for what purpose, and then they become dissatisfied with the results. In any event, high-quality investments in employee development can generate substantial bottom-line returns, particularly in the use of tools and techniques commonly associated with sound quality principles.

Once again, it's vital not to view training and education as something "extra" or "special." In order to be most effective, employee development must be blended into the fabric of daily business as "just the way we do things around here." Otherwise, individual priorities can derail the development process very quickly.

- **Eliminate "fear interference."**

The implications of Handy's premise that "quality is truth" go beyond the importance of using data-based measurement tools like SPC or the hazards of trying to hype and sell teammates. His thesis also is highly relevant to the effect that fear has on the performance of individuals and organizations.

Berlo says, "Where there is fear, there is no trust; where there is no trust, there is no truth; where there is no truth, there is no reliable information; where there is no reliable information, there can be no quality."

It's an elemental equation: fear = no quality. When you consider the vast majority of employees who fear for their jobs today, it's little wonder American business is having so much trouble with quality improvement efforts.

- **Be patient and persistent.**

The American Society for Quality Control has published a booklet called "The Hare and the Tortoise Revisited." In it, they tell of a Japanese consultant who likens the quality process to farming bamboo. Once the bamboo seed is planted, the farmer must water it every day for four years before the tree even breaks the surface of the ground. But when it finally does, it grows 60 feet in the next 90 days.

It's really that shift—that commitment to the long view that marks the companies that will be most successful with their performance improvement efforts in the future.

## **General communications considerations**

Much of what is proposed in this document to help us pull out of the quality program trap can be summed up in four simple words: getting back to basics. That's especially true for communications. Rather than developing "motivational quality campaigns," let's focus on communication fundamentals.

- **Measure what people do in response to communications, not just what they know.**

Professional communicators often wonder whether or not their efforts are of any real value to the organization. But unless you're a mind reader or do lots of readership surveys and communications audits, it's hard to determine what people know as a result of most communication efforts in the organization. And even then, it's hard to assess the value of that knowledge.

It's a lot easier to detect what people do than what they know. It's also easier to determine whether or not they're doing the kind of things you want them to do. Wherever possible, find ways to measure behavioral response to your communications instead of the amount of knowledge acquired by people. It's also a much more viable barometer for management to use in gauging the value of communications.

- **Show the blemishes along with beauty marks.**

Employees get weary of rose-colored reports that come out of the corporate party line. They can smell propaganda a mile away, and they can see right through the thin veneer of "corp-speak" designed to disguise the truth. No wonder employees have such a ho-hum attitude toward a lot of company publications.

If you want people standing in line at your door for the next issue of the house organ, give them straight talk—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Truth can be a powerful magnet. Don't use it just to be provocative, but let people in on some of the tough issues that the company is facing and where the company has stumbled and recovered.

- **Accommodate employee preference for face-to-face communications.**

Virtually every survey that's been done on employee communications indicates two distinct biases:

1. They prefer to hear important information about the company, their department, and their job face-to-face, not through print or electronic media.
2. They prefer to hear it from their immediate supervisor.

Attempt to accommodate those preferences whenever possible, and provide supervisors with the direction and support they need to communicate effectively with their employees.

- **Allow for consumer-controlled information.**

Most people complain about the following two basic communications problems:

1. Communication is lousy around here. Nobody tells me what I need to know to do my job right. I can't figure out what's going on. They keep everyone in the dark so much they might as well be in the mushroom business.
2. I'm overwhelmed with information. I can't see the top of my desk for all the papers, magazines, letters, memos, proposals and reports I have to deal with. If I don't find a way to get this situation under control, I'm liable to choke to death on all of it.

Too little communication; too much information. Sounds peculiar, but it's really not uncommon in today's business environment.

One way to deal with that dilemma is to decrease the number of messages initiated in the system, and simultaneously increase employees' accessibility to information that they want and need.

Southwestern Bell Telephone Company has instituted a new menu-driven employee information system designed to do just that. In the past, the company was fighting an uphill battle to get timely information out to employees. The problem was especially acute in situations in which the media got the information before the company could get it distributed internally, and employees would get their first notice about important company news through the newspaper.

Now, at any time of day or night, employees can call The Company Line, a telephone news service that offers a menu of current information, stock quotes, quizzes, surveys, and more. It's a win-win for companies and employees alike. The communications department isn't running at breakneck speed to try to beat the news coverage. The flurry of paper distribution is down. Employees get much more timely information, and they get it at their own discretion.

You can't use this approach in all situations, of course. Certain types of information must be distributed to everyone to ensure that no one is left out of the loop. But allowing employees to assume responsibility for informing themselves in some areas will help alleviate information overload and simultaneously increase their perception that the company is doing a good job of communicating.

- **Account for costs of receiving and processing information.**

All organizations have budgets, including communications departments. But virtually all of the expenses identified in those budgets are for producing and distributing information, and nothing is specified for receiving and processing it.

Enormous expense is involved in having employees read printed materials, listen to tapes, attend meetings, and process all the information in response to those communications. Sometimes that expense is far greater than the cost of producing and distributing the information. It's also an expense for which companies and communications departments seldom do any detailed accounting.

Here's an example. The president wants to send a memo to 10,000 employees. The average time spent reading and processing that memo by each employee is 15 minutes. That's 2,500 person hours. The average wage is \$10/hour. It may have cost the company \$500 or less to produce and distribute that memo, but it cost them \$25,000 for people to read it and process it. It may have been worth \$25,000, but most companies seldom ask the question. They look at one side of the cost equation and proceed.

That's one of the hazards of desktop publishing. Anyone can get into the publishing business, and some organizations have literally dozens of publications floating around. They may be inexpensive to produce, perhaps, but frightfully expensive to consume.

Significant communication costs are hiding throughout the organization. Be alert and avoid them wherever possible.

- **Establish "feedback loops."**

Research experts say today that you have to pay attention to customers more closely and more frequently than ever before because periodic "snapshots" of customer attitudes or behavior aren't sufficient to stay in tune with rapidly changing trends. TARP is highly critical of what they call the once-a-year "do you love us" surveys. They suggest much more frequent, ongoing communications with customers in a sort of continuous series of communication feedback loops.

So does Regis McKenna, a marketing consultant who recently wrote an article for *Harvard Business Review* called "Marketing is Everything." In it, he points out the importance of not merely trying to satisfy

the customer, but actually “integrating the customer systematically” into the company. With that approach, the customer, in effect, becomes part of the product development team.

The same type of interactive feedback loops are important for internal communications, as well. Any communicator worth his or her salt knows that one-way communication is a one-way ticket to disaster. But in order to be truly effective, feedback must be frequent and continuous. Companies need ongoing dialogues with employees, not once-a-year attitude surveys.

Communicators must take the lead in ensuring that communications systems throughout the organization offer that kind of continuous interactive dialogue.

### **Avoiding the “quality communications” trap**

If you subscribe to a broad interpretation of the premise that “quality is truth,” then the communications function has to make a fundamental shift from promotion and hype to counseling, education, and straight talk. In order to avoid the typical “quality campaigns,” submit the following recommendations:

- No publications devoted exclusively to quality.
- No capital Qs in the word quality in mid-sentence.
- No quality vision/mission statements.
- No quality pep rallies.
- No quality training.
- No quality councils or task forces.
- No quality mugs, banners, stained glass windows, or other monuments and testimonials.
- No program themes, slogans, or related acronyms like TQM. If you simply can't live without one, try JTWWDTAH (just the way we do things around here.)

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you should stop communicating about your performance improvement efforts. Quite the contrary. Your publications should be full of the things that people are doing to make improvements. Vision and mission statements are valuable parts of the planning process. Training and education should become as regular as a paycheck. Task forces should be allowed to tackle special problems and opportunities. And everybody ought to have a coffee mug—perhaps even one with a company logo on it.

But somehow, *all* of these things need to become part of the furniture, like “just the way we do things around here.” The best thing that all of us can do for quality is to give it a rest. It's overworked, and people are tired of hearing about it. What's more, we just don't need it. Most people are aware of the continuing competitive challenge in the growing world economy, and they're eager to work on ways to meet it.

They don't need “the show” to get them there. What they need is support, direction, encouragement to contribute, the opportunity to be heard, and managers who put the words into action.

For communications professionals, the lessons are clear. Break out of the “reporter, promoter, apologist” paradigm, and set your course for a comprehensive, strategic role based on commitment to truth and knowledge, not to persuasion in general or certainly misrepresentation in particular. Do that, and you'll have all the quality you can handle ... and without needing a single capital Q.

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