

Down with QUALITY program-itis

What's wrong, anyway?
We in the U.S. wrote
the book on quality.
Where did we get off
the track, and more
importantly, why are we
having so much trouble
getting performance
rolling again?

About a year and half ago, when I was still director of communication for Pet Incorporated, I gave a speech to the joint membership of IABC and PRSA in St. Louis. Pet was struggling with a quality effort at the time, but I was unswerving in my declaration that total quality management (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 U.S., from greenhorns to 'gurus,' from colleges to corporations, it's clear that something is seriously amiss. In fact, there's fairly widespread agreement that the number of companies who are *struggling* with TQM far outnumber those who are *succeeding* with it. And, ironically, it seems that communicators are contributing to the problem.

In declaring that “quality is here to stay,” we’re missing the fundamental point that what business has to sell in the final analysis is *not* quality, but goods and services. As a result of that oversight, we’ve created such a hoopla around “total quality” that it has become the thing to be promoted and improved, instead of the processes that organizations use and the products and services they deliver.

While there is no single or simple solution 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 would be an immediate “program-ectomy.”

If we hope to institute continuous, ongoing performance improvement as a way of life, we have to understand a fundamental imperative that 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 such a way that those efforts are utterly indistinguishable from “just the way we do things around here.”

Stated more succinctly, although somewhat more cryptically: *If you want “quality” to work, it has to be invisible.* Anything apparent, anything that “sticks out” from the ordinary is typically seen as a program, and all programs ultimately suffer the same fate. They’re terminal. They have a beginning, a middle, and — eventually — an end.

Communication professionals should be among the first to spot the dilemma and offer solutions. But, in fact, the opposite appears to be true.

- Many organizational communicators actually are playing a large role in

creating and perpetuating TQM “program-itis,” ultimately undermining the very process they intend to support.

That’s particularly ironic because communication professionals for years have wanted to play more substantive strategic planning roles within their organizations. Yet the functions that management has come to expect and value most — and also the ones that communicators are using most extensively in implementing quality improvement efforts — are the yeoman roles of *reporter*, *promoter* and *corporate apologist*.

While all three of those functions have their place, they are either insufficient or incompatible with the kind of systemic change that organizations say they’re seeking in pursuit of “total quality,” especially the role of promoter. The functions that are needed most to support system-wide change are precisely the ones that communicators have said they’ve wanted all along — advisor, strategic planner, and leader of the communication process — not just as it relates to publications and news releases and special programs, but as it comprises the central nervous system of the organization.

Making that shift is no small task, but it is possible — even essential — if communicators hope to play the roles they’ve always sought, and if we want to cure a potentially lethal case of “program-itis.” A good starting point is to rethink the very definition of quality itself.

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 in 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
- The systematic application of common sense

But the definition with the farthest 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 twentieth century. One is the nature of organizations. In his discussion of that topic, he devotes a brief section to quality and says that “*quality is truth.*”

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

Berlo is not specifically involved in the quality arena, but his thinking has significant implications for the general quality quandary we’re experiencing and the specific relationship between quality and truth.

In a presentation entitled “The Eternal Quest for Perfection,” which he delivered last year at the national conference of the Society for Human Resources 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.

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 knew it.

That’s one reason why people who use statistical process control (SPC) have found it so 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 peculiar dilemma we communicators are facing in our roles as *promoters*.

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.

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.

If the company is lucky, the worst reaction they’ll get from employees is, “So what?” If they’re not so lucky, people can become deeply resentful.

The ultimate issue, 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*.

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.

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 good old-fashioned fundamentals which encompass both general management and specific communication issues. While not all of those issues can be addressed within the scope of this article, here are a few basic things that communicators can do in their own practice and also help promote throughout their organizations.

- **Measure employee actions in response to communication, not just their knowledge.** It’s a lot easier to detect what people *do* than what they *know*. It’s also easy to determine whether or not they’re doing the kind of things you want them to do. For example, don’t ask employees whether or not they like a story about corporate recycling; instead, establish a way of measuring how employees changed their recycling habits as a result of the story.

Wherever possible, find ways to measure *behavioral response* to your communications instead of the amount of *knowledge acquired* by people. In addition to providing a better measure of your impact, it’s also a much more viable barometer for management to use in gauging your department’s contributions.

- **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 internal newsletter, 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 also to let people in on some of the tough issues that the company is facing and how the company has stumbled and recovered. Get rid of the pap, and your credibility and readership will soar.

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

Virtually every survey that’s been done on employee communication indicates two distinct biases:

1. They prefer to hear important information about the company, their department, and their job face-to-face, not mediated through print or broadcast;

2. They prefer to hear it from their immediate supervisors.

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 communication 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."

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."

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 *increase* employee accessibility to information that they want, and can get on their own.

Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, St. Louis, Mo., 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 where 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 local 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. Furthermore, employees can select a code from the menu to comment back to management on the stories they heard.

It's a win-win situation for company and employees alike. The communica-

tion department isn't running at break-neck 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 the costs of receiving and processing information.** All communication departments have budgets. But virtually all of the expenses identified in those budgets are for producing and distributing information, and nothing is set aside for receiving and processing it.

• **Enormous expense is involved in having employees read printed materials, listen to tapes, attend meetings, and process 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 communication departments seldom do any 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. The memo probably cost the company \$500 or less to produce and distribute, but it cost them \$25,000 for people to read it and process it. It may have been worth \$25,000 — maybe more — but most companies seldom ask the question.

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

• **Establish "feedback loops."** Any communicator worth his or her salt knows that one-way communication is

a one-way ticket to disaster. But to be truly effective, feedback must be frequent and continuous. Companies need ongoing dialogues with employees, not a once-a-year attitude survey.

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

• **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 employees. His thesis also is highly relevant to the effect that fear has on the willingness of employees to provide feedback to management.

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."

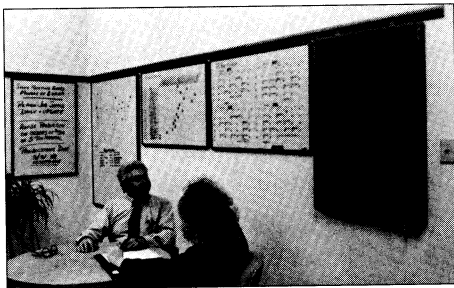
It's an elemental equation: fear = no quality. When you consider the vast majority of employees who fear for their jobs today, it's little wonder business is having so much trouble with quality improvement efforts.

Avoiding the 'quality communication' trap

If you subscribe to a broad interpretation of the premise that quality is truth, then the communication function has to make a fundamental shift from promotion and hype to counseling, education and straight talk. Rather than the typical approaches to "quality campaigns," I submit the following recommendations:

- No publication 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.

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A computerized news release mailing system from PR Data Systems, Inc. can reduce costs and increase usage. Smart Lists software creates a series of core mailing lists based on extensive research of media patterns for specific clients. The software predicts which media are likely to use a given news release. Savings are realized through reducing mailing quantities. Call (800) 227-7409 or write PR Data Systems at 15 Oakwood Ave., Norwalk, CT 06850.

For anyone facing a career-threatening crisis, "Bouncing Back: How to Stay in the Game When Your Career Is on the Line" is an upbeat and practical book from McGraw-Hill. The author, Andrew J. DuBrin, discusses building a support network, coping with the situation at home, re-entering the job market, and practicing preventive career maintenance to keep adversity at bay. To order a copy (U.S. \$24.95 hardcover; \$14.95 paperback), call (800) 2-MCGRAW.

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- 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 part 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 *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 — at least not the hype of it. Most people are aware of the continuing competitive challenge worldwide, 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 "walk the talk."

For communication 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 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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structures. The more enlightened now seek worker cooperation in drafting corporate mission statements in language everyone can understand and then endorse.

Many examples of joint management and union participation also exist in distribution of funds for corporate social responsibility schemes, in the provision of employee housing and in-house training and of informal face-to-face meetings between management and workers all the way to floor cleaners to discuss freely issues of concern to the firm's well-being.

These forums also explore cross-cultural differences and how to achieve understanding.

Communication channels of this kind are still supported by conventional media such as corporate publications — tabloids, magazines and videos — which in turn are looking for fresh ways of using icons and points of reference that effectively amplify and explain.

But experimentation and research into other forms of effective communication to overcome the many barriers to understanding must be intensified so that corporate South Africa and the country itself can take its place among equals in the modern world.

To this end, leadership inevitably must pass from White to Black communicators who eschew propaganda and hold true to already established standards of credibility and integrity.

And IABC/Southern Africa itself seeks platforms to bring communicator and management together to seek joint participation in developing the new ideas and techniques that are needed.

Given the magnitude of the challenge, the solutions are unlikely to come from anywhere else.

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