

EYE ON QUALITY

Ideas and Observations from Leaders in the Quality Movement

Falling into the 'Program Trap' Takes Focus Off Critical Quality Issues

Les Landes is a St. Louis-based communications and performance management consultant — and a self-proclaimed former total quality zealot. His work today centers on helping organizations avoid what he calls "the program trap."



Semantic and Structural Missteps

The trap has two components: structural and semantic. The structural dimension deals with the physical and organizational things we create to manage this thing called quality: quality vice presidents, departments, teams, and so forth, under the delusion that doing so will automatically improve quality. It's a matter of confusing symbols with substance.

The semantic dimension deals with what we say and how we say it. Images and symbols become substitutes for the reality of operational improvements. It's as though somebody went to a restaurant, picked up a menu, and said, "Ooh, that looks good," and then gobbled up the menu instead of ordering the meal. Talk about quality becomes a substitute for the real thing. An example of that is the department store with signs championing quality and service excellence everywhere, but none directing customers to rest rooms or to the electronics department.

Once a "quality program" is unleashed within an organization, it takes on a life of its own. Companies create elaborate campaigns and theatrical productions. People get engaged in jargon and rituals, doing and measuring things to create an illusion of impact — visions, missions, "quality" publications, speeches, team meetings, acronyms — all with very little substance. And they're not really fooling anybody.

We have to strip the quality movement from its methods. Yes, we have to measure more effectively. Yes, we have to make sure we find ways to enable people at all levels in the organization to have input in changes and improvements. But it can be done using language people understand. You don't have to use the words "statistical process control" to tell people, "Look, when this machine performs this way put a check in this column. When the machine does something else, put a check in another column. And next week we'll see how many

checks we have in all of those columns, and that'll give us an idea of where this problem is coming from."

Undefining Quality

We have to reexamine how we define quality. There are numerous definitions: Quality is communication, reliability, absence of variation, doing the right thing right the first time, and so on.

Any definition of quality ensnares you in the program trap, because the minute you use one, you're talking about day-to-day operational activity in a way that's foreign to common business language. So I subscribe to the notion that you should have no definition of quality. Stop using the word right now, because it's causing confusion and aggravation.

But if you absolutely can't sleep at night without a definition for quality, use this one, from Charles Handy, author of *The Age of Unreason: Quality is truth*. That seems simple-minded, but management consultant David Berlo clarifies it. He says you have to understand the distinction between the nature of lying and truth. Lying is a matter of intent and truth is a matter of content.

Lying is basically an intention to deceive, mislead, or manipulate a situation to your advantage. That is not unlike how some people approach selling. One thing is true about all selling: Its goal is not teamwork, but compliance; to get everybody to accept and agree to your point of view. And you don't foster teamwork by "selling" people, because when it backfires, you create a trust crisis.

Trying to "sell" the quality concept suggests people are unwilling to support efforts to improve the organization, and that's simply not true. They're eager to participate if they're invited instead of being forced, tweaked, or manipulated. Peter Senge says it beautifully: You cannot manipulate commitment.

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There's nothing wrong with using programs, as long as you know their limitations. One is that you cannot use them as the foundation for a systemic change. Organizations that try end up missing the target entirely.

Programs, by their nature, are temporary and terminate. The National Institute of Health says that, of all the people who begin diet programs on Jan. 1, over 90 percent will gain back every pound lost plus more by the same time the next year. People are caught in a myth, believing that a program will take care of their weight, when what is needed is a fundamental change in the way they live and relate to food.

So it is with total quality management. If we think in terms of quality "programs," we're instilling a sense of temporariness. With each program's conclusion or demise comes another, focused on a new facet of the organization. And changes brought about by the first program fade away. That not only does nothing to strengthen a company, but actually exacerbates its problems. We perpetuate the myth that all we need to do is focus on process, and results will take care of themselves. We become fixated on process for process' sake.

Most people recognize the truth in that, yet are unable to see it in their own organizations. They apply euphemisms such as "continuous improvement," or phrases that imply their programs are part of an ongoing journey, not a destination. They say "We have a process, an effort, an initiative." That kind of rationalization is what makes the program a trap.

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