

TQM: FATALLY FLAWED OR SIMPLY UNFOCUSED?

BY RON ZEMKE



It sometimes seems that every new idea about the world of work draws detractors almost as fast as advocates. A kinder, gentler assessment might be that the more impact an idea has, the more critical the

need for sober consideration of its merits.

So it should come as no surprise that after an unprecedented 12-year roll—kicked into high gear by Philip Crosby's book *Quality Is Free* and the NBC special report "If Japan Can, Why Can't We?"—total quality management is under fire. Some recent criticisms:

- A report from the American Quality Foundation concluded that the total quality movement is floundering badly. Terrence R. Ozan, a partner at Ernst & Young and the author of the report, traces many of TQM's problems to the scattershot, fix-everything-at-once approach so loved by consultants and encouraged by competitions such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Concludes Ozan: "A lot of companies read a lot of books, did a lot of training, formed teams and tried to implement 9,000 new practices simultaneously. You don't get results that way. It's just too much."

- The never-reticent Tom Peters—one of the people who inspired a lot of today's quality fervor—took aim at TQM in a recent issue of his consulting company's newsletter. He wrote: "TQM is flawed. Now I think fatally flawed. Prediction: Twenty years from now, when the history of the epic transformation of American business during the 1980s and the 1990s is written, TQM won't even get a footnote (though maybe a couple of laughs)."

- Les Landes, a St. Louis communications consultant who speaks and conducts seminars around the country, has gone from zealot to critic in two short years. A year ago, he criticized some aspects of TQM at a Public Relations Soci-

ety of America conference. Since then, he says, "I have been invited to speak and conduct seminars in numerous places around the country by folks who are joining what appears to be a growing TQM counterrevolution."

Criticisms of the TQM bandwagon fall into five major categories:

1. *Lack of focus.* This is Ozan's complaint. The idea that thousands of employees in groups of five to 10 can focus time and energy on their own idiosyncratic, local quality issues and eventually produce a great corporate quality breakthrough plays better as dreamy social theory than as business sense. Quality has many dimensions, points out David Garvin, a professor at the Harvard School of Business. The wise organization decides which dimensions to compete on and focuses its efforts there.

2. *Rigid orthodoxy.* I'd like a dollar for every letter to the editor we receive that includes some form of this complaint: "If you really understood W. Edwards Deming and followed his 14-point plan, you wouldn't ask these questions about TQM." Substitute "The Book of Revelations" for "Deming," and you'll get a feel for the tone of rock-ribbed zealotry.

3. *Form over function.* This is the root of Peters' complaint, as his recent observations on the German quality movement make clear. "My research in Germany revealed matchless quality, service, modern equipment, value-added products (toys, stoves, machine tools), and nary a quality circle or SPC chart."

4. *Flavor of the month.* This is one of Landes' hot buttons. His list of sure signs that "this program, too, shall pass": "Quality pep rallies; quality councils, task forces and bureaucracies; quality mugs, banners, stained-glass windows or other monuments and testimonials; and capital Q's on the word quality in midsentence."

5. *Awareness over skills.* This is a per-

sonal gripe. I recently asked a public relations person at a Baldrige-winning company how the organization's extensive quality-training programs had changed the way its PR department operated: What TQM tools was the department using? What was it monitoring now that it hadn't before? The reply was instructive: "Well, it's really more an appreciation of the quality thing. We don't do anything differently, but we are more aware of the importance of quality." For that, this company spent several million dollars on a program that took thousands of employees away from their jobs?

The penny dropped for me with the word "appreciation." Curious, I perused the classroom materials of six popular, heavily marketed quality-training programs. The common feature in five of the six was, indeed, "appreciation." What these programs really amount to is Music Appreciation 101, with Deming, Juran and Crosby subbing for Bach, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky.

The problem with these courses is that they create appreciators instead of doers. There is ample evidence, accumulating since the late '70s, that management-theory survey courses don't produce better managers. Should we be surprised if quality survey courses fare no better?

It's not a question of doubting the importance of the quest for quality. We've all seen more than enough evidence that the quality crisis is real. We must solve the puzzle of how to create and deliver high-quality, high-value products and services to demanding, cost-sensitive customers. But to be successful, we've got to focus on ends and outcomes, results and performance, not on demagoguery or process beautification or glitz. Our touchstone must be true, sustained improvement—not "right" ways and reverence.

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