by Les Landes

Un-TQM: A Common-Sense Approach to Systematic Improvement

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One of the seminal events in the annals of the modern-day quality movement was the TV documentary entitled "If Japan Can, Why Can't We?" The program aired on June 24, 1980, and it marked the first time that most people had ever seen or even heard of the man who eventually became known as the quintessential quality guru. That man, of course, was Dr. W. Edwards Deming.

Ironically, Deming shunned the association between himself and the quality crusade. He rarely, if ever, used the word quality in connection with his own work. He denounced the notion of "total quality management" — actually despised the term — and he expressed little confidence that American companies would ever understand what they really needed to do in order to manage their businesses competitively. He summed up his feelings on that point in a 1990 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. When asked about the prospects for the future of the American workplace, Deming responded critically and succinctly, "What future?"

In recent years, the ranks of quality skeptics have swollen, and for good reason. More than 14 years after Deming was introduced, we find in study after study that the vast majority of quality improvement programs have been unqualified failures and abandoned within two years of their initiation.

The Program Trap

A critical common factor running through many of these failed quality efforts is a phenomenon I call the "program trap." Much more severe than the old, familiar program-of-the-month syndrome, the program trap that has emerged around TQM has resulted in a persistent fixation on the jargon, the rituals, and the symbols of quality rather than the substance of operational improvement. The field of general semantics explains this phenomenon as an inability to distinguish between the physical substance of something and the symbols that represent it. People caught in that perceptual warp have difficulty making a meaningful distinction, for example, between the map and the territory, between the menu and the meal, or between the prescription and the medication. In terms of TQM, the program trap fosters an environment in which quality takes

on a life of its own, separate and distinct from day-to-day operations. It shows up in slogans, banners, acronyms, pep rallies, advertising, team-mania, misguided measurement systems, bogus accomplishments, and a "foreign language" that employees typically find odd at best and threatening at worst.

You can see it in countless situations, for example:

- The customer who complained because the department store which had signs posted everywhere touting their commitment to quality, customer service, and satisfaction, but no indication of where he could find the bathroom or the merchandise he wanted to buy.
- The airline which ran a letter from the chairman in its in-flight magazine welcoming passengers to their "Year of the Customer." (That was 1992. I haven't flown on that airline since. After all, their focus on the customer apparently ended two years ago.)
- The company which measured the performance of supervisors by the percent attendance of their employees at team meetings. Outcomes were not relevant since the company had bought into the myth that focusing on process will eventually lead to desired results.

In spite of these misguided efforts and many more like them, TQM marches on unabated. As an example of how it has swept through the business community, Westinghouse reportedly was the only company in the Fortune 500 with a vice president of quality in 1979. By 1990, that number had jumped to more than 300, along with the attendant staffs that no self-respecting corporate vice president would ever be without.

So the stage is set for a long run of the "TQM Show." But are employees willing to pay the price of admission? Unless companies find a way to avoid the quality program trap, the answer is likely to be a resounding "No."

The Road to Reason

Breaking the grip of the program trap and gaining employee support is no small task. It involves a series of challenging but essential steps, including:

- Acknowledging the problem
- Purging the quality "liturgy"
- Shifting beliefs about human nature
- Demystifying the principles of TQM

Acknowledging the problem.
Many companies that are stuck in the program trap are convinced that they aren't. They either can't see it, or they simply refuse to acknowledge its existence, even in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary.

An easy test is to see if employees are expressing the frequent lament, "I don't have time for all this quality stuff on top of my regular work." If you hear that kind of protest, no matter what you may believe about your improvement efforts, you most assuredly are stuck squarely in the middle of the program trap.

Purging the quality "liturgy."
Purging the "liturgy" (TQM really has become a religion) begins with the eradication of "alphabet management" — terms like TQM, CQI, CPI, QFD, SPC, and so on. We may even have to dump the word quality altogether — at least until the kneejerk reaction to it dissipates along with the quality movement itself.

Those terms and the entire lexicon that has emerged around them may appear innocent enough at first; but they have some very unsavory effects. At the least, they allow people to speak the language of quality with considerable proficiency and still not really know what they're talking about. At the worst, people can't distinguish fact from fancy or substance from symbolism, and they become disoriented and immobilized.

When you cut out the jargon and use common, every-day language, you can get down to a pretty simple, people-friendly way of describing what the zealots call TQM. It's a comprehensive, systematic process for solving problems and making improvements. The rationale for a systematic approach is pretty simple, too. With it, improvement efforts tend to be more strategically planned, taking into account the well-being of the entire organization. Without it, improvements tend to be random and reactive, which can lead to at least three serious problems:

1. Organizations get a lot of quick fixes, using a band-aid approach that fails to remedy the root cause of the problem.
2. Improvements tend to be disjointed and disconnected. The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, and changes made to effect improvements in one area wind up causing disruption and poor performance in another.
3. Bad judgment results from decisions that are made in haste or without verifiable information.

If the rationale for systematic improvement is so clear and compelling, why do so many organizations struggle to get people engaged in quality improvement efforts?

In order to keep people from tuning out and turning off, organizations must strip the movement from the methods of quality improvement, and weave those methods invisibly into the natural fabric of day-to-day business as though they were "just the way we do things around here." Any effort to persist in using the symbols of the "movement" as the basis for improvement is doomed to ultimate failure.

Shifting beliefs about human nature.
In spite of changing times, organizations still tend to look for someone to take the heat when things go wrong. But if there's one principle that virtually every quality expert agrees upon, it's this: the vast majority of all problems in most organizations are due to faulty systems and processes, not faulty people — as much as 85 to 95 percent according to some estimates.

It's important to understand some

basic truths about human nature, beginning with the following factors about performance and motivation:

- People want to do a good job. Very few people come into work every day looking for ways to screw up, and they get a lot of satisfaction from a job well done. If it looks as though they don't care about doing good work, you'd better check out the system; true or not, people probably feel there's something outside of their control keeping them from performing the way they would like.
- People want to improve. Most people get a sense of satisfaction from making improvements in their lives — their skills, their finances, their love-life, their health, you name it. Everyone wants today to be at least a little bit better than yesterday and tomorrow a little bit better than today.
- People want to be part of a winning team. Nobody wants to be associated with a loser, and everyone likes the feeling of winning. There's a strong natural instinct to defend and support the "home team," especially if it's a winner.
- People don't resist change. They resist being forced to change without their consent or involvement. Push people, and they'll push back. That's as certain as the sun rising in the morning. But if they have some control over decisions, direction and planning, people do not tend to resist or fear change. In fact, they actually instigate it to avoid boredom. Remember the old saying, "Variety is the spice of life."

Demystifying the principles of TQM.
People need to regain some common sense about the principles of good, basic management. Much of what is heralded as the "revolutionary" principles of TQM really aren't very new at all. They're timeless traits

that typified good companies long before the advent of the quality movement:

- Focus on customer satisfaction
- Continuous improvement
- Employee involvement in planning and decision-making
- Teamwork and cooperation
- Adjustments made throughout production process, not end-line inspection and rework
- Respect for people
- Pride in workmanship
- Continuous training and education
- Operational measures as basis for performance appraisal
- Building trust and reducing fear
- Open, honest communications
- Share rewards of improved performance
- Committed leadership

Whatever else may be said about those principles, one thing is clear. They're just plain common sense, and it doesn't take a "movement" to validate them. True, many organizations have not applied those principles consistently and effectively in the past; but wrapping them up in a glitzy program package won't enhance their credibility, and it almost certainly will prevent them from being embraced by employees and being woven into the basic fabric of daily work.

Common-Sense Clues to Successful Systematic Improvement

- Lead by example, not force or manipulation. People respond best to leadership that provides vision and cooperative planning, not mandates or inducements foisted on people in the name of some high-sounding mission.
- Meet people's needs; don't try to motivate them. People are already motivated, and they don't resist change unless their needs aren't being met or they're being forced against their will.
- When there is a problem or mistake, approach people as the source of the solution rather than the cause of the problem. It doesn't

take a rocket scientist to realize that people become defensive, fearful, and resentful when they come under attack for making an unintentional mistake. Approach them as someone you can count on to help resolve the problem, and you'll get a dramatically different response.
- Use teams appropriately. Beware of team-mania. There's a time and place for teams, but they're not the answer to everything. Don't encourage people to form a major task force, for example, to figure out where to position the salad dressing in the cafeteria. Also, discourage pro forma team meetings. They need to be purposeful and results-oriented. Meeting just for the sake of meeting is the epitome of the program trap.
- Be customer-sensitive, not customer-driven. Customers are the most essential part of any business mix, but they're seldom the most informed. So it's actually a disservice to customers to say they're always right. If doctors and lawyers operated under that principle, they would lose their license to practice their profession.
- Avoid the misnomer of the "internal customer." The most distinguishing characteristic of a customer is that he or she can leave any time they want. They aren't beholden to anybody. That's hardly the kind of relationship you want between co-workers. What's needed is mutual commitment — partnership. In fact, the goal should be to eliminate the concept of the customer altogether. Start using the terms internal and external *partners* rather than internal and external *customers.*
- Decrease the volume of messages; increase access to information. Oddly enough, people in organizations are complaining simultaneously about too little communication and too much information. People are overloaded, but they need to get critical information somehow. The trick is to reduce the habitual distribution of

messages, and increase access to the information people want and need to do their jobs with the exception of a few essential company secrets and confidential personnel records.

- Talk sense. The days of decision-making based principally on authority have to be put permanently to rest. As a sign in the lobby of one Malcolm Baldrige award winner says, "In God we trust. All others must bring data." Don't overdo the measurements and data gathering, though. Keep it simple, and use it only in situations where it's clearly indicated. Otherwise, people simply won't take the time to do it.

- Talk about quality and improvement in common every-day language. When you use the quality jargon, employee reaction is predictably inhibited because the jargon sounds odd and phony. It also reinforces employee suspicions that another management program is underway, which is usually received with understandable skepticism since they've seen so many programs come and go in the past.

- Foster an adult-adult relationship between managers and employees. In most organizations, employees and managers work together in sort of a parent-child relationship: managers provide direction and discipline while workers listen and ask for permission. That's an unnatural way for adult human beings to work with one another, and it discourages employees from assuming greater responsibility and taking greater initiative in the workplace.

- Advocate systematic and systemic initiative. Unless there are common ground rules, which are jointly defined by the entire team, individual initiative can lead to disruption rather than improvement. So be sure to encourage people to involve others and carefully evaluate the impact of their improvement plans on the rest of the organization before proceeding.

- Ensure that training is appropriate, properly paced, and relevant. Give people what they need and *only* what they need. Training is important, but too much all at once is disruptive and difficult for the learner to internalize. Also make sure it ties directly to real-life situations they face on the job. Relevance translates into interest and acceptance.

- Provide encouragement and support systems. As people begin to learn and apply new tools and techniques, be sure to provide public encouragement for the process and acknowledgment for their achievements. You also want to be sure that your basic operating systems don't interfere with the process so people don't become frustrated with their problem-solving and improvement efforts.

- Reduce the threat of a negative outcome. No sane human beings will ever jeopardize their own well-being. So if you want people to embrace the process of making improvements and solving problems, they need to be assured of a positive outcome. At the very least, they have to be certain that it won't be a negative one like getting "right-sized" out of job.

- Stop merchandising TQM or any other organizational effort; people get weary of it quickly.
  - No program themes, logos or slogans.
  - No quality mugs, banners, or monuments.
  - No capital Qs on the word quality in mid-sentence.
  - No publications devoted exclusively to quality.
  - No quality vision/mission statements.
  - No quality pep rallies.

- Eliminate the quality bureaucracy. We need to reverse the trend of Fortune 500 companies appointing vice presidents of quality. Focus on getting everyone in the organization seeing quality as their own personal responsibility rather than the duty of the quality department.

"Reality is What We Crave"

Henry David Thoreau, the 19th Century author and philosopher, didn't realize it, but he talked about the problem with TQM in his writings. "Reality is what we crave," he wrote. "Everywhere, shams and delusions are esteemed as deepest truths, while reality is fabulous."

The shams and delusions of TQM, while clearly unintentional, are blinding many organizations to basic common sense and the substance of reality. The result is a perilous distortion that can only lead to frustration and resignation. The solution is straight talk, focus on substance, and a resolute commitment to draw on the natural instincts of human beings to do a good job, improve the quality of their lives, and be part of a winning team. ⮞

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