

A close-up photograph of a mechanical watch movement, showing several interlocking brass gears. The gears are highly polished and have a golden-brown hue. The teeth of the gears are sharp and precise. The background is blurred, showing more of the intricate mechanism.

What Is the Point of Total Quality?

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We in America, indeed, much of western society have become accustomed to giving customers less than they want and less than they expect. In doing so, we left the door open for foreign companies, particularly the Japanese, to take away whole markets that were formerly icons of American ingenuity and business strength.

You know the list as well as I do; automobiles, motorcycles, cameras, machine tools, electronics, and steel. And while many explanations are proffered for Japan's success, the real secret lies in a national commitment to quality. Total Quality.

The Japanese are committed to satisfying the customer every time, not just most of the time. They do this by finding out what the customer wants and then by systematically ridding their systems of conditions that yield anything other than the customer's desired end result.

Over time they have found that by focusing on better and better ways of meeting customer expectations they do not cost themselves money, but in fact cost themselves less money – lots less. Moreover, they discovered that the Total Quality concept applies not just to factories and those who seek to produce defect free products. Rather, Total Quality applies to everyone who generates ideas, those who render service, and those who provide information to others in the corporate system.

The Japanese implement these beliefs by acquiring a complete understanding of their production processes, the marketing processes, and their financial processes. They establish very clear definitions of what everybody in the system, every customer, and supplier both inside and outside the company, needs and expects from everyone else. They are intolerant of anyone who fails to meet these expectations once they have been established.

Has Japan always been this way? No. Remember in the 1950's when "made in Japan" was synonymous with "junk?" How did Japanese products come to mean "quality" rather than "junk?"

The transformation did not come easily. At the end of World War II, the Japanese had to struggle to survive. Everything had to be rebuilt.

Fighting to rebuild taught the Japanese an important lesson many American business executives would do well to learn. When you don't have to fight for something, the tendency is to be less responsible, even careless. Lower standards become acceptable, and job security decreases.

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Institute training. Workers often learn their jobs from other workers who were not trained properly in the first place. Management owes every employee a specific training program that will develop the employee to the fullest potential.

Institute leadership. The job of a supervisor is not to tell people what to do or to punish employees, but to lead. Leading consists of helping people do a better job by providing individual help to employees.

Drive out fear. Many employees are afraid to ask questions or to take a position on an issue. In these circumstances, people will continue to do the wrong thing, do things wrong, or not do things at all. Remove fear from the workplace and productivity, and quality will increase.

Break down barriers between staff areas. Staff areas of a company often are competing with each other or have conflicting goals. Build these departments into interconnected teams with common business goals.

Eliminate slogans, exhortations, and targets for the work force. Brightly colored motivational banners rarely motivate anyone except the person who put up the banner.

Eliminate numerical quotas. Quotas take account of only numbers, not quality or methods. They are usually a guarantee of inefficiency and high cost. An employee afraid of losing his job will produce low quality work just to meet a quota.

Remove barriers to pride of workmanship. Most employees are anxious to do a good job and distressed when they can't. Unfortunately, misguided supervisors, faulty equipment, and defective materials stand in the way of producing high quality. Remove these barriers.

Institute a vigorous program of education and retraining. Both management and the work force will have to be educated about the new methods, including teamwork and statistical techniques.

Take action to accomplish the transformation. Effective implementation of Total Quality requires that Total Quality work habits are modeled by top management and every level of management down to the factory floor. Nothing is as frustrating to an employee as a day spent learning about Total Quality only to be pressured to meet a quota the next week. Commitment to Total Quality must be 100% from the top down.

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Obstacles

Here are nine of Deming's obstacles to Total Quality:

Lack of constancy of purpose. A company without constancy of purpose (a vision) has no long-range plans for staying in business. Management is insecure and so are employees.

Emphasis on short-term profits. Focusing on the short run for the sake of meeting a short run goal often undermines the achievement of the long-term goal.

Evaluation by performance, merit rating, or annual review of performance. A single annual review destroys moral and teamwork. Evaluation and feedback need to be given immediately and often.

Mobility of management. Job hopping managers never understand the companies they work for and are never there long enough to follow through on long-term changes that are necessary for quality and productivity.

Running a company on visible figures alone. The most important numbers are very hard to obtain. For example, the multiplier effect of happy, well satisfied customers.

Excessive costs of warranty. Warranty costs include fixing defective products and paying for attorneys.

Neglect of long-term planning and transformation. Many American businesses have been learning about Total Quality for a few years now, and most of the initial work has taken place in engineering, manufacturing, and purchasing departments. It is time that Total Quality is embraced in sales, operations, transportation, and all other areas of a company's operations.

Relying on technology. Technology is not always the answer to solving the underlying problem that creates poor quality or lower productivity.

Copying solutions from others. Copying a solution to a problem from someone else may be an excellent example of "search and reapply knowledge," but it may not help if you do not understand why a solution was successful, or why one failed.

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Many people who are exposed to Total Quality principles for the first time are still inclined to ask, “So what’s new? Haven’t we always stood for quality, for thoroughness, for continual improvement? Haven’t we prided ourselves on knowing our consumers and having productive relationships with suppliers and consumers?”

To which the answer is hopefully, “Yes, of course.” But Total Quality adds several new dimensions to these traditional company values and gives us an entirely new set of tools to evaluate our performance and improve our rate of progress.

Three Big Ideas

Total Quality is a big, robust strategy that has something to offer every person in the organization. There are three especially big new ideas emerging from the Total Quality concept that deserve special attention because they apply to us all.

1) Continuous Improvement

The first of these big ideas deal with the proposition that continuous improvement of quality creates a powerful new force for breaking through traditional performance barriers.

Ask a manufacturing supervisor how many widgets can be produced in a shift, and he will give a number that is considered the upper “impenetrable” upper limit. He learned about this limit from the man that trained him, and they had confirmed time and time again that there were certain levels of achievement that simply could not be surpassed.

Like the “unassailable” four-minute mile, companies who employ the Total Quality concept of continual improvement are achieving breakthrough performance.

2) Focus on Quality

The second big idea has to do with the fundamental assertion that improved quality is not in conflict with other desirable results, but rather supports them. Contrast this with the conventional wisdom that suggests that you must sacrifice something you’ve already got if you want more of something else, like more expense to deliver fewer defects.

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Total Quality teaches us that if we focus first on the quality of our activity, then attention to getting things right, and getting them right the first time, will drive the entire system to be more efficient. You get better television commercials with fewer retakes, better package design at lower costs, and better memos with fewer rewrites.

3) Build Partnerships

The third big new idea is that there is a tremendous competitive advantage to be gained through the establishment of new more productive relationships with one another; those inside the company, as well as those outside, the suppliers, and customers.

In the past, we frequently established “arm’s length” relationships with suppliers and customers, and in so doing we denied ourselves all the benefits of partnership.

One Final Thought

In a very real sense, Total Quality is serving as the catalyst by which many teams and task forces are beginning to realize their full potential by building a better understanding of what people and organizations require and are capable of delivering to one another.

Net, Total Quality has found receptive audiences at many companies. Where it has been embraced, Total Quality is helping companies achieve their visions. While this progress is noteworthy, we are unfortunately years behind the Japanese in our awakening. We will have to run to catch up.

Every day you work you have an opportunity to participate actively in the Total Quality concept, even if those around you do not. Here is a simple guide to help you keep Total Quality in your work:

Do the right thing. Like setting priorities – don’t be doing ‘C’ priority work when an ‘A’ job is at hand.

For the right reason. Set your priorities for the right reason – they need to match the corporate vision.

The first time. Set priorities that match corporate goals and execute correctly the first time.

Creating a Total Quality work style will not come easily. You will have to fight every day to train yourself to do the right thing, for the right reason, the first time.

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As you work towards your Total Quality goal, keep the Biblical law of sowing and reaping so insightful conveyed by Stephen Covey in mind, “Sow a thought, reap an act. Sow an act, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap your character.”