

Is Total Quality still relevant today?

If we did a post-mortem on every industrial and commercial accident or blunder in the last 15 years, I am certain the results would point to process failure. In Singapore, we are starting to see incidents and accidents of train mishaps, HDB structures dislodging themselves and mismanagement of public funds. Could it be a coincidence that until the start of the new millennia, we hardly read of such incidents because many businesses then were run with a Total Quality mindset?

Cost-cutting or complacency?

There are perhaps two reasons many businesses opt to do away with independent quality assurance, such as ISO9001 certification. The first is cost-cutting and the other a belief that they do not need a third-party audit firm to tell them how well they were managing their quality. That was probably where their problems began.

Managing own quality is a conflict of interests

When an organisation decides to manage its own state of quality, the first casualty is accountability. Because we do not have an independent view, we often overlook minor lapses and errors. We are, after all, both maker and checker. These errors are not documented or reported and in some cases, not even corrected. This actually represents a conflict of interests. Of the five principles of Total Quality Management:

- Getting it right the first time
- Putting the customer in the centre of everything we do
- Having a strategic approach to improvement
- Improving continuously
- Encouraging mutual respect and teamwork

the most difficult to manage and sustain on one's own is getting it right the first time. This discipline requires accountability of brutal honesty, without which there will be repercussions. When we don't get it right the first time, we invite mistakes. And when we do not treat these errors, however innocuous, with the same degree of care we do big errors, we lose the opportunity to analyse its trend and put preventive actions in place.

Connecting every moving part in the organisation

Early practitioners of Total Quality would doubtless have watched the classic 1983 training video "Who Killed the Sale?", which showcased an efficient salesman who successfully closed a sale but was let

down by errors made by his colleagues in production, customer service and delivery. Eventually, the company lost the sale. So, who do we blame? The situation from the video is still relevant today because we still see companies exhibiting disparate degrees of work ethics and quality in different departments. An organisation that's strong on quality has a discernible culture and it will show up in the way its employees - at every level - deal and communicate with its customers.

Quality starts from the Top

To build a quality organisation, we must first build a quality culture, and that starts with the very top defining a direction for its business and its employees. This is usually manifest in the company Mission and then its Quality Policy. Every employee, regardless of rank, must understand the company's Mission and define his role in fulfilling its Quality Policy because these elements drive the behaviour and attitudes that represent what the company stands for.

Tips for managing your own Quality System

As running a business gets more digital, and human interfaces start to fall away, process management gets more neglected. However, any company that's serious about building and managing its own quality system without independent help, might want to consider the following tips to be successful:

1. Display strong and visible commitment at the top, including those in supervisory roles.
2. Employ someone to specifically look after quality and empower this person.
3. Systematically and continually train every employee to deliver the company Mission and meet the Quality Policy, including how to own and resolve his own work problems.
4. Set performance targets for every job and make every employee accountable for improving the performance of his department.
5. Finally, constantly monitor the effectiveness of your quality system!