

ICQ'05-Tokyo
International Conference on Quality
September 13 ~ 16, 2005

Is there a Role for a Quality Manager?

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Abstract: *As a consequence of the Japanese threat to the Western manufacturers, which became obvious around 1980, we could see an increased interest in quality during the 1980's and the 1990's in the West. During the last years this interest is declining. This is seen both in Europe and in the United States. As the interest for quality is declining it is also questioned in many companies if there is really a role for a quality manager. Can we operate without this function? Obviously, there are quality related tasks important to the company. Who has to have the responsibility for these tasks?*

Key Words: quality department, quality manager, quality management, quality profession, quality tasks

1. THE RISE OF THE “GOLDEN ERA” FOR QUALITY PROFESSIONALS AND INSTITUTIONS

The way of managing for quality has during the last century been developing a great deal. This is of course due to a tremendous development of the industrial and service sectors. Managing for quality has gone from being dealing solely with inspection in the 1920's to be more and more involved nowadays in company-wide strategic issues with a wide implication for the business outcome^[1]. During the first half of the 1980s the level of interest in quality among top executives started to build up. The reason for this growing interest was that it became obvious to many of them that quality was going to have a growing influence on a company's future and its development. This awareness was prompted by the stiffening competition in quality, above all from Japan^[2], and the steadily more rigorous quality requirements made by customers. The growing interest started a “golden era” for quality professionals.

What did the professionals offered? The answer is specific methods. The focusing became on the methods, not on the results to be achieved. Some of the methods became the “fashion of the day”. There was virtually an explosion in the area of applying trendy methods in the 1980's, when it became obvious to many Western companies that they were being driven out of business by Japanese companies^[3]. Companies found that they had to do something and were willing to try anything.

Some of the methods that became trendy in the West were consequently an influence from Japan, as by way of example Quality Circles, Statistical Process Control, Quality Function Deployment, Seven

QC Tools. Other “fashions” came, now with no direct influence from Japan: ISO 9000, TQM, Benchmarking, Business Process Reengineering, Balanced Scorecard, etc. Some have faded away, others will do.

For many people the “fashions” were like a religion that could not be criticized. The advocates were like religious fundamentalists. The author, when criticizing the use of “fashions”, has several times experienced this fundamentalism. This was for instance the case as a consequence of an article published in Quality Progress^[4], where the use of Quality Circles in the West as the only means of improving quality was criticized. The editor added an editorial note saying “The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily of the American Society for Quality Control or Quality Progress”. It was not appropriate to criticize Quality Circles at that time, not even in a professional context.

Quality professionals, as well as quality institutions (national quality associations, standardization bodies, quality consulting companies, quality awards organizations, etc.) faced a “golden era”. Their services were looked for. They seemed to be very successful in their operations.

2. CAN WE NOW SEE THE FALL OF THE “GOLDEN ERA”?

There’s nothing wrong with the “fashions of the day” as such. The fault lies in how they are implemented. They were in the West often used as general methods and tools for improvements and, used in this manner, lead just to marginal results. They ought to be used when an analysis indicates that they are the appropriate measures to eliminate specific problems or to better meet the needs of the customers. The same is true for all other methods and tools which are part of the quality profession and which have not been widely publicized, even though they may mean a great deal more with respect to the results achieved.

It is obvious that there is decline in the interest for quality^[5]. Clear signs of this development are that the attendance of public quality related courses and seminars is falling in many countries, the same with quality conferences. Quality organizations can see that the number of members is declining. For some of these organizations there is a crisis.

3. THE QUALITY FUNCTION HAS FAILED

The reduced interest is due to that the result of the quality initiatives has in many cases been meagre. As a consequence of this, many company executives have lost trust in what quality professionals can achieve. This has resulted in that quality departments have been downsized and even been removed from the organization. The executive leadership has looked for results, but the quality function has failed in delivering these results.

Quality professionals very often criticize executives, saying that the interest in quality is lacking in the top of the organization. The author’s experience is that executives are interested in quality, but quality professionals have not approached them in the right way. Instead of focusing on the company’s business outcome, the quality professionals limit themselves to advocate various methods, which often is done in a philosophical way.

In an article on leadership^[6], it is discussed why not more have been achieved in the field of quality in companies. J. M. Juran is referred to in the article. He gives several reasons:

- Executives are sceptical; many companies have tried to “do” quality and failed.
- They have learned not to trust quality advocates – internal and external.
- Executives believe, “Our business is different.”
- Many executives believe becoming certified to ISO 9000 will solve all quality problems.
- The varying quality terms and programs create confusion and a belief that higher quality costs more.
- Many executives believe that they can lead their organizations to quality leadership without becoming personally and deeply involved.

The blame for the situation described in the points above, can partly be laid on the quality professionals.

The failure of the quality function increases the opinion that there is no need for a quality manager in the organization. Each and every individual in the company has a responsibility for quality and so it is obvious that the quality manager can be made redundant. In addition, it is also been said that the goal of the quality department is to work for eliminating itself.

4. QUALITY MANAGEMENT COMPARED TO FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Another discipline to be considered is financial management, which is a discipline that shares many similarities with quality management. All employees have, to a greater or lesser extent, an affect on the company’s financial outcome. The same is true for the result in terms of quality. If a good financial result is to be achieved, co-ordination and control of the entire business with a focus on finance, is essential. The same is true for quality.

To chief executives, it is self-evident that they have to give a clear and goal-oriented leadership in the financial field. This leadership is also focused on achieving the intended result in monetary terms. To support this leadership, the company has a finance department, managed by a finance manager. This structure is regarded as a matter of course in medium-sized and large companies. But what clear and goal-oriented leadership do chief executive officers provide, when it comes to quality? They might not see a leadership of quality as quite so obvious. This has to do with a lack of understanding and knowledge of how to manage for quality.

Just as a chief executive in the provision of leadership within the financial area requires the support of employees who are professionals within the field, the exercise of leadership within the field of quality also requires the support of professionals in that particular field. It is here that the quality manager and the quality department should have an important role. Recognition of the fact that every individual has a responsibility for the company’s financial result in no way implies that there is no need for a finance manager or a finance department.

5. QUALITY RELATED TASKS TO BE CARRIED OUT

Two characteristics of successful companies are their quality of management and their management capital^[7]. The quality of management includes customer value leadership, operating cost leadership, total resource use and empowering a company culture of superior performance. The management capital includes using the company's total resources in order to achieve growth and profitability. These two aspects are in a broad way related to the company's approach to quality.

There are many quality related tasks to be carried out. Listed below are fields where such tasks exist. The tasks have to be assigned to somebody. This "somebody" can have the role of a quality manager. This doesn't necessarily mean that there must be a quality department responsible for these tasks. The tasks can be assigned to a department dealing with matters related to the company's overall business performance, which includes finance, quality, ethics, environmental issues, etc. There exist already organizations where the quality function and the finance function have merged. In the future we will probably see more of this organizational set-up. This is a consequence of that the traditional quality department has failed in delivering business results.

5.1 Acceptance and verification

There was a time during the development of the quality profession when questions relating to the acceptance of manufactured products would normally be the responsibility of an inspection department, which was run by a quality control manager or chief inspector. Many companies have abandoned this type of organization. This area of responsibility has been transferred to the respective line-department, which is a sound development. In some cases, however, the traditional organization has been retained, and then usually with a change of title from quality control manager or chief inspector to quality manager.

The quality manager in this traditional form of organization is responsible for activities relating to inspection, such as incoming inspection, in-process inspection, final inspection and inspection planning. The work can also involve tasks relating to the verification and validation of new products (including software).

Tasks related to this field should be assigned to the functions directly responsible, which means manufacturing, product development and design, software development, etc. The quality manager should not be involved in these tasks.

5.2 Follow-up

In this field, the role of the quality manager is similar to that of the controller in the financial area. It is a matter of following up to ensure that the tasks are being performed in the desired manner and that established goals are being reached.

The duties of the quality manager include producing information that shows the results in terms of quality, as well as providing management and other parties concerned with the information they need. The work therefore includes developing, introducing and maintaining systems for the feedback of

information concerning customer satisfaction, existence of faults and failures, costs associated with poor quality, process output, results of quality audits, etc.

Follow-up also includes responsibility for quality auditing. This could include system audits, process audits and product audits. At companies possessing ISO 9001 certification, the quality manager also has responsibility for the internal audits required in the standard.

5.3 Running improvement projects

Improvement activities shall be conducted in a structured way and they should include the products and services provided, as well as how the operations are being conducted. The object is to satisfy the customers' requirements more effectively and also to eliminate faults and failures. Special consideration must be paid to chronic problems.

The quality manager has an important role to play in the improvement process. Initially, the role includes developing a structure for the improvement activities, as well as the necessary procedures and pattern of responsibility. The quality manager shall then drive the actual improvement process, which means ensuring that information on the quality status is available, identifying and ranking improvement projects on the basis of analyses, and ensuring that improvement projects are started and completed. The quality manager is responsible for ensuring that information on improvements made is brought to the attention within the organization.

Improvement work according to a Six Sigma approach is gaining in interest. More and more companies are practising Six Sigma as an improvement strategy. In these companies the quality manager has a key role. It could be as a Master Black Belt or as a Six Sigma Deployment Director.

5.4 Promotion

Many companies, if they are to achieve significant improvements, will need to give their internal culture a greater focus on quality. This requires changes in attitudes and the introduction of new knowledge and skills. Everyone in the company must become involved in this process.

Changing processes like these have to be initiated and driven by the quality manager. This includes, above all, planning and providing training in quality for everyone in the organization. Naturally, this does not mean that the quality manager has to act as instructor himself/herself, but he/she must see to it that the training is arranged and carried out in such a way that it has a significant effect on the operations. Training in quality must not become an end in itself.

The quality manager will also exert influence in various other ways. One such way is to serve as a source of inspiration and motivation, not only in the day-to-day work but also in many other situations.

5.5 Source of information

For companies to be successful, even in the future, it is necessary to keep up with the professional developments that take place in areas important to success. A major area of this kind is quality. The quality manager has to follow the developments of the quality profession, both nationally and internationally, and use the information collected for benchmarking purposes. Steps that seem eligible as an outcome of this effort are proposed to top management.

The quality manager serves within the organization as a source of information on the state of the art of the quality profession.

5.6 Strategic business development

Quality is of strategic importance to every company. This means that the business is being continuously developed with a focus on quality, for which a strategic plan should exist. This plan should combine different concepts, approaches and methods in such a way that the company achieves excellent results.

The quality manager plays an important role in the development of the business by providing top management with ideas and advice on issues for how the business can be developed with a focus on quality. The tasks also include preparing the ground for management to make strategic decisions and supporting management in the strategic planning. The decisions of a strategic nature are made by top management.

For the business to be developed successfully, it is essential that the quality manager is properly qualified in the quality profession. He should be able to judge what the company should be doing to achieve the excellent results intended.

5.7 Co-ordination and management

All activities that have an impact on quality must be co-ordinated. It is also important to have quality-oriented leadership practices. Without such co-ordination and leadership, there is a serious risk of the company's operations suffering from sub-optimization and ill-considered activities.

The quality manager supports top management in this area by taking steps to ensure that the operations are conducted in a structured and systematic manner. This involves ensuring that the work is process orientated, as well as dealing with matters pertaining to quality policy, quality goals, quality systems and organizing for quality.

5.8 Partnership with customers and suppliers

A close co-operation with customers and suppliers is becoming more common. Such a co-operation is particularly important to develop with the customers and suppliers having a considerable impact on the company's situation and result. The term partnership is often used in this connection.

The quality manager has an important role in developing partnership with customers and suppliers when it comes to quality related issues.

5.9 Certification

For companies aiming at an ISO 9001 certification of their quality system, the quality manager has several tasks:

- To explain what the requirements in the standard mean for the company;
- To ensure that the quality system is structured in a way that suits the company;
- To co-ordinate the development of the necessary procedures;
- To ensure that the quality system and the relevant procedures are documented;
- To ensure that quality documentation is distributed to the parties concerned;
- To manage the implementation of procedures;
- To handle contacts with the certification body before and during the certification process.

Once the company has obtained certification, the quality manager will have further tasks:

- To ensure that internal quality audits are carried out in accordance with the requirements in the standard;
- To act as the management representative as laid down in the standard, which involves having the authority and responsibility to ensure that the requirements in the standard are satisfied;
- To maintain the quality system and the relevant procedures;
- To ensure that all documentation is kept up-to-date;
- To ensure that the documentation is distributed to the parties concerned;
- To handle contacts with the certification body.

5.10 External representation

The company might have to be represented externally in some contexts. This could involve work on quality committees of trade associations, participation in national quality programs, work on national standardization, and other such representative activities.

It is often most appropriate for the quality manager to represent the company externally in connection with this kind of matters related to quality.

6. QUALITY MANAGEMENT IS A PROFESSION

Nobody questions the fact that financial management is a profession. The job of finance manager is not given to a person without an education in economics and accounting. Finance managers have generally completed a four-year university education within their professional field. Professionalism in this field is a must.

Do we make equivalent demands when appointing a quality manager? It is hardly so in many companies. Other qualifying factors come into the picture. It may be that the individual in question has experience of the company's operations or is well known within the organization as good at working with others and possessing a sound judgement. There could be numerous reasons and many of them quite sensible, but the rate for the selection of a person for the job of quality manager seldom is based on his or her knowledge within the field of quality management. This fact is sometimes due to the view that quality management is not a profession, and sometimes to the lack of people with a proper qualification in the field.

Recruiting senior personnel within the quality area without requiring them to be professionals can have unfortunate consequences for the business. Quality is, properly speaking, a question of how a

business is to develop. The wrong choice of strategies and methods, incorrect ranking of priorities and missed opportunities can have very serious consequences. Selecting a quality manager without paying regard to professional competence can be just as serious a mistake as appointing a finance manager without checking if he or she is qualified in economics and finance.

7. CONCLUSION

There are many important quality related tasks that have to be carried out in an organization striving for success in its business. These tasks must be clearly defined and assigned responsibility to. In carrying out the tasks, a quality manager can have an important role to play. His/her work can be performed in a quality department, but more likely in a department that has a broader responsibility covering the company's overall business performance - finance, quality, ethics, environmental issues, etc. Such an organizational structure can contribute to an improved standing for the quality related work. A prerequisite, however, is that the manager in charge has a sound knowledge of applicable concepts, methods, tools, etc. and is able to apply these in a way that produces excellent business result for the company.

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