



## Thoughts on Quality



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When an international movement involves millions of people, has a positive impact on hundreds of millions, and has advocates from both academe and the workplace in several dozen countries around the globe, it may seem difficult at first to see the worth (or, for that matter, the possibility) of offering “original thoughts” about the central idea.

The central idea in this case is “quality” or, as it is also known, “continual improvement” or “performance excellence.” While instances of doing the right things right the first time and every time (one of the more common of dozens of definitions of quality) can be found throughout the ages, quality as a movement, as an organized, teachable methodology for how an organization should function, began in Japan in the 1950s and 1960s.

When the resultant Japanese goods – initially automobiles and electronics – began to arrive in the United States, their “quality” was undeniable. The products worked better than their American counterparts and they were less costly. The international quality movement was launched, driven by simple economics: customers proved themselves far more likely to spend their money on quality goods and services.

The search began for how to best achieve quality in any field. The linchpin of the new/original ideas that are proposed and described in the following paragraphs is 100% employee involvement, meaning the formal enrollment in the quality effort – from the outset of the process – of every person on the payroll from the CEO to the person who was hired into the mail room yesterday. And then seeing that they all take part.

The name we have chosen for this approach is a Complete Quality Process, with the idea being that the process is complete both in that every person is involved and in that CQP is structured to include the use of every appropriate quality tool. CQP is the superset. Six Sigma, ISO, Lean, Kaizen, etc. are the subsets.

“But, wait,” will come the response. “That’s not original. We invite everyone in our company to take part in our efforts to improve.”

First a word on the meaning of the word “original.” When Leonardo da Vinci sketched out the dimensions of a conical parachute in 1480, it was an original idea. When France’s Pierre Blanchard actually built a parachute in 1785 and, after giving his dog the honor of the first parachute jump,

jumped into history himself, he was also credited with an original idea – because he demonstrated a way to make the theory into reality, into an act that could be repeated.

When we advocate 100% employee involvement in the process to improve everything an organization does, it is because we have actually done it, rigorously and successfully, twice. In fact, while “Total Quality Management” was a catchy title for an often beneficial set of steps, in practice, TQM was virtually never “total.” At best, everyone was “invited” to take part in what should have been called Partial Quality Management.

The difference between CQP and all other approaches can be best explained by looking at the beginning point, the initial path taken on the road to reaching full potential. With TQM or Quality Circles or Six Sigma or any of the other well-known methodologies, the first step is to answer the question, “Who is going to be actively involved in this?” The path-defining response taken by virtually every organization is to identify specific people who will be designated for special training and, subsequently, looked to as the “quality people.” These folks will be expected to discover and define beneficial changes, changes that, most often, others will then put in place.

With CQP, the first question is, “Who can we afford to exclude from this effort to improve everything we do?” The question could also be worded “Whose thoughts do we not want to hear?” Either way, the answer is obvious: “Nobody.” Welcome to 100% employee participation, a very different path indeed.

CQP requires active leadership throughout an organization, most definitely including example from the top. It is not sufficient for managers at any level to simply proclaim, “We are a quality company and you people need to work smarter.” The executives and senior and middle managers must also improve what they do and they must make those improvements in an obvious way. No one can follow an example they can’t see.

Every person on the payroll should be designated as a member of a specific team that is given authority equal to its responsibility (the functional definition of “empowerment”). The Chief Quality Officer and his or her staff (which should be quite small) train the Team Leaders; assist the teams as they devise, verify and implement ideas; maintain the computer-based tracking program that brings order to the potential chaos; insure that communications is pulsing through the company in all directions; conduct or arrange training in all appropriate “quality tools;” and make very sure that every deserving team is recognized for its achievements with appropriate gratitude and celebrations.

When a change effort of this magnitude is in operation, there are two interesting effects on senior and middle managers. For one thing, there is so much activity going on that it is all but impossible to micromanage every effort to define and implement improvements and, second, those who do attempt to micromanage the improvement process will be very obvious.

Not all employees will embrace this new approach immediately. This hesitation may be because of natural shyness or because of previous poor experience with “PQM” programs. The fact that not everybody speaks up at once – and at the same time – is, in fact, a blessing as it results in a natural evening out of the flow of ideas throughout each year.

When the overarching original idea – 100% employee involvement – is put in place, it necessitates a

series of thoughts that will be, in their final details, original to each organization. Examples include the format for the idea tracking program, the means of communication employed to make sure that every employee understands the opportunities being offered, the nature of the training classes on the topics of quality and leadership (which should include some original ideas and approaches as well), and, perhaps most interesting, how to blend in the use of such valuable quality tools as Six Sigma and Lean without degrading the uniqueness and vitality of a CQP effort.

The current range of available quality tools does, after all, raise one primary question: How can an organization take advantage of more than one of them at one time? To do so will require an original approach. Specifically, to do so requires taking the path that is far less often traveled: the path labeled Complete Quality Process.