

Don't Forget the Q Word

Do you remember TQM? How about ISO 9000? Or even BS 5750?

For those of you like me who've been around a bit, it will bring back memories of quality circles, statistical process control and lots of written procedures. But for those of you too young to remember, it may just be a list of meaningless acronyms. In which case, let me explain that this article is all about the "q" word – quality – and why it's as important as ever to your business and your projects.

You see, although the great management consulting fads at the moment are technology breakthroughs like Web 2.0, mobile working and SOA, back in the 80's and 90's when the Internet was something only academics and defence companies had heard of, quality was the 'big thing' that no self-respecting MD would dare ignore. No longer were companies just concerned with efficiency and productivity but now were focusing on customer satisfaction, the corner stone of quality.

Why? Because it was seen as a great differentiator between you and your competitors. The strength of Japanese industry, particularly in the automotive sector, was attributed to their relentless pursuit of quality and was in stark contrast to the more casual attitude of many European and North American companies. So the more forward thinking manufacturing organisations started to adopt the Japanese quality approach, to make their products stand out from the opposition. (Ironically, as students of quality systems will know, the methods developed so successfully by Japanese industry were based on work by Messrs Deming and Juran, both prominent US engineers).

Quality in thought, word and deed

The basis for this quality approach was that, rather than ring-fence the responsibility for quality within one (quality) department, who would simply measure and accept or reject the product being produced, the whole manufacturing process was designed, developed and monitored to maximise quality. The watchword of the time was 'kaizen', a Japanese version of continuous improvement where the goal was perfect quality or zero defects. Quality teams (or 'circles') were set up to involve staff at all levels in the search for the perfect process, and techniques such as SPC (statistical process control) were used to monitor how well the process was performing and if it was in or out of control.

Variations on kaizen such as the PDCA (plan-do-check-act) cycle that was developed by Shewhart and modified by Deming, evolved into systems like Six Sigma at Motorola and then into a broader quality culture like Total Quality Management (TQM) that attempted to embed quality into everything and everyone within the organisation, guided by a quality policy and implemented in accordance with standards like ISO 9000 and ISO 9001. And just to make things interesting, quality competitions such as those sponsored by Malcolm Baldrige in the US and the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) Excellence Awards bestowed fame, if not fortune, on the lucky winners.

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But like all management fads, the quality movement started to run out of steam at the end of the 90's and now barely warrants a mention in the consulting journals. Partly this was because the return from TQM investment often took longer to arrive than anticipated but also the promise of rapid transformation through BPR (business process re-engineering) tended to turn the heads of MD's under pressure to deliver quick results.

So why haven't TQM and other quality strategies reclaimed their place in the spotlight? Is this because everyone has achieved the 'world class' quality standards that we all strived for in previous decades?

I don't think so.

Is it because the management consulting industry is more interested in promoting other, sexier, themes?

More likely.

Show me your project quality

That's a great shame as quality is as important to your business and to your projects as ever.

The whole point of continuous improvement is that you never reach perfection – that's why it's continuous – so to lose focus and neglect quality will inevitably result in loss of customer satisfaction and, eventually, your customers business. So what do you need to do to get that focus on quality in your projects that will delight your customers?

To start with, a definition will help. Quality is one of those abstract words that give you a warm feeling, and everyone agrees that more is better, but to point to it in your projects isn't easy. My favourite definition, as stated in the PMBOK[®] Guide¹, is simply "the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirements". In a project context, we are trying to ensure what we produce, whether it's a new process, a change in capability or a new product, meets the needs of the customer and is fit for purpose.

Sounds simple but as we all know, identifying the needs of our stakeholders and ensuring the deliverables meet those needs is never a trivial exercise. In our quality plan we need to identify who the stakeholders are, what their needs and expectations are and come up with an agreed set of requirements that are unambiguous, achievable and relevant to the overall objective of the project. The deliverables that meet these requirements should be defined in terms of quality standards or acceptance criteria that can be measured to ensure they are fit for purpose and achieve the underlying requirements.

Once you have agreed the project plan, how do you ensure that you follow it and meet your quality goals? Quality assurance (QA) is the answer – a process by which you check the quality of your tasks and outputs. For tangible products this is the traditional inspection process

¹ PMBoK Guide 3rd edition, PMI

typically done before delivery or commissioning and for intangible services and business changes, this may be an acceptance test or pilot. However you plan to do this, it's important that it's included in your project plan and budget as the cost of QA can be significant. My recommendation is that you carry out an audit of your quality assurance to ensure you've covered all your requirements and deliverables and have the resources and capabilities to do it, before you submit your project plan for approval.

You also need to give some thought to who is going to be responsible for this work? It may be a central QA resource that already exists in your company or you may need to include this as a responsibility of your project team but don't forget the golden rule that QA shouldn't be done by the individual or team who has done the work in the first place. It's important that you have an independent but informed resource if this is going to be effective and truly measure the quality of your project work.

Of course, there's no point carrying out this QA work if you don't make use of the results. If the measure is a simple pass/fail, this is self-evident but you might need to use more sophisticated tools and techniques for analysing other results. For example, a control chart or a flowchart may be more appropriate. And when you have collected the results, you may want to use techniques like Pareto analysis and Ishikawa diagrams to analyse the underlying cause of the failure if there is one. Once identified, this becomes a project issue that you would document and act on like any other problem or concern. This quality control (QC) aspect of your project is easily ignored but is the true test of how well you have implemented your plans and your quality assurance. You won't meet your project requirements by accident but by careful planning and verification instead.

The real cost of quality

In a nutshell, that's where the strands of your quality approach should be woven into your project. Of course, like any other project activity there are cost and time implications and so you need to find a balance between your constraints on time and money and your objective of maximising quality. Keep a firm grip on scope and ensure you don't 'gold-plate' your deliverables to achieve an optimum balance. But don't think by cutting corners with quality you will save your precious budget. If you think good quality is expensive, wait and see how expensive poor quality is!

Take your project management to the next level

Another important aspect of quality applies not to specific individual projects but to how you manage projects in general. Like any other business process, your project management processes and policies can always be improved and should be included in the scope of your quality system whether it's ISO 9001 or your own concoction. By applying the PDCA cycle to your project management processes, you can

- measure and analyse your current processes to identify shortfalls in performance (plan),
- run a pilot with updated procedures and policies (do),
- evaluate if this has the desired effect in improving performance (check)

- and then implement across the whole organisation (act).

To help you with this, you may wish to involve an external consultant who has experience from other peer companies and can help manage this process. Or if you are lucky enough to have an internal consulting team or project support office (PSO), you can turn to them to provide the skills and resources to support you. Involve other members of your project team to get a realistic view of what will work and what won't and to build commitment to any changes you decide on, especially during the pilot phase and, like any other business change process, don't forget the importance of regular communication and training to overcome that corporate inertia.

For reference, there is even an ISO standard (ISO 9006:2003) that gives guidelines for managing quality in projects. Although not a certificated standard, it is a useful yardstick to compare your processes to and contains more detail about specific quality activities such as interim and final project audits. A note of warning however; it's not as thorough in other equally important project management processes, so you should incorporate it with a broader project reference such as Prince2 or PMBoK.

And after all this hard work in improving your project management capability, don't forget to tell your customers what you have been doing. After all, this is based on their needs and requirements so should represent a real step forward, from their point of view. There is real marketing value to doing this that should convert to repeat business or new clients.

Resurrecting the past

To summarise, why don't you go and dig out that old quality manual that's been sitting on your desk for the last 10 years, blow the dust off and remind yourself what you set out to do all that time ago. Think about how you can apply it, not only to your current projects but also to your project process in general. And then discuss your ideas with your colleagues to see if you have the basis for a business improvement project.

It may not be trendy to talk about quality at the moment but it's still important and can be a huge benefit to your business. After all, good business practice never goes out of fashion.