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Six Myths of Quality

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American business owners and managers are being bombarded with the quality message. Business leaders, consultants and academics have decided that quality is the primary variable in the success (and the survivability) equation for U.S.

business as a whole and for individual companies in all industries. Quality is a subject which merits the current fervor. However, the emergence of a number of myths has led some organizations, which truly believe in quality, down a path to less than complete success.

Myth 1 - Quality is a function of what's done at the individual worker level.

This myth is dangerous because it implies that the problem and the solution are at the individual level. Employees on the firing line (making products, dealing with customers) do indeed have the greatest influence on quality. However, they're only as good as the system in which they work. Most people want to produce high quality results. However, if one pits a good performer against a bad system, the system will win every time. Management is responsible for building three types of quality into the system:

- **Strategic Quality.** The organization's scope and direction, its competitive advantage (especially the aspects related to quality), and its strategic objectives are clearly articulated and communicated.
- **Operational Quality.** Work systems (the methods and flow through which work gets done) efficiently promote the production and delivery of high quality products/services.
- **Environmental Quality.** Individuals work in a setting which supports quality performance.

Quality starts at the top. Key decision makers must go beyond delivering pep talks to building systems - strategic, operational and environmental - which enable people to provide first-time quality to internal and external customers.

Myth 2 - Quality can be implemented through a program.

When management sets up quality circles or initiates quality training, it may be separating quality from the mainstream business. Organizations which are serious about quality may have QCs and quality training, but they are part of the normal business process, not special programs. Think twice about appointing a quality director - people may think that staff person is responsible for quality.

Myth 3 - Each function should strive to improve quality.

Quality should be organizationally focused, not functionally focused. The sales function can improve quality by selling products which are customized to meet customer needs (even if they are impossible to make at a profit). R & D can improve quality by enhancing the technical capability of a product (even if it is not needed or can't be manufactured). Manufacturing can improve quality by increasing yields and reducing rework (even if inventory levels become unacceptably high). As each function optimizes, the organization suboptimizes. While quality (as well as productivity and cost) improvement potential exists within every function, the greatest opportunities lie in the interfaces between functions (in the white space, as opposed to the boxes, on the organization chart). To optimize organization quality, management should look "horizontally" at the way work flows and remove impediments to the cross-functional customer-supplier relationships.

Myth 4 - Quality is best addressed through awareness and culture change.

Awareness is not enough. Many organizations have done an excellent job of preaching the quality religion, educating

people on the Japanese approach to quality, and building quality slogans into the daily language. This approach is motivational, but, without tools and systems, it tends to have little long-term impact. Organization culture is often equated (perhaps inappropriately) with style and artifacts. Style and artifacts will not create quality. A quality culture is a byproduct of systems which make quality the only viable alternative.

Myth 5 - Quality results from the use of statistical process control (SPC) techniques.

SPC techniques can make a significant contribution to organization quality by serving as tools for identifying technical problems which contribute to quality fluctuations. Measurement is critical to any sustained quality effort. However, SPC techniques are only one important tile in the quality mosaic. Without strategic, operational, and environmental systems that support quality, all the SPC (and technical problem-solving) in the world will not result in organization-wide quality.

Myth 6 - Once you've got a quality strategy and quality work processes, your only need is for quality people:

To complete the quality picture, the critical ingredients of strategy, processes and people need to be supplemented with a fourth - an effective performance system, or environment, surrounding each individual in the organization. A manager who establishes a performance system which promotes quality performance:

- Sees that quality expectations (standards) are established and understood
- Removes barriers to high quality performance
- Provides regular, specific feedback on quality
- Ensures that the rewards for quality performance are more powerful than those for "clearing the decks."

With these environmental conditions, sufficient skills, and logical work systems, individuals can do what they are inclined to do anyway — produce high quality products and services for their internal or external customers.

The quality responsibilities of managers in organizations of all types and sizes include:

- Establishing, communicating and monitoring a strategy which clearly articulates the role of quality in the future of the business
- Designing cross-functional organization processes which efficiently and effectively get the work done
- Creating an environment around each individual which supports quality performance
- Measuring performance and closing gaps at the strategic, operational and individual levels.

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