



CUSTOMERS, NOT 'CULTURAL DIFFERENCES,' ARE THE KEY FOCUS ON LEADING QUALITY

Memo: Quality at Work

Edition: Final

As I consult internationally between Nigeria and South Africa, the issues of cultural differences pertaining to implementing the quality processes are always raised. I have a tendency to negate that culture makes a significant difference, in both countries.

Thinking that culture makes a significant difference in the way an organization approaches total quality management can lead to disillusion. Believing that "we are different" and that quality is dependent on culture or where you live on the globe is a fallacy. This belief can cause a company to embark on its mission thinking it is operating at a handicap.

Some will argue that the reason Japan is a quality leader has to do with its culture. They point out that the Japanese are homogeneous and are not faced with the so-called problems of diversity. The insinuation is that with Nigeria being made up of over 250 ethnic tribes and cultures, cooperation for quality is impaired.

Care must be taken in thinking that homogeneity is a controlling variable. One has only to recall that the Japanese were all alike when they had a reputation for delivering inferior products. What changed their reputation to producers of superior products was their "thinking or attitude," not any of the homogeneous variables that tend to suggest better cooperation among people.

I am not saying that it is entirely wrong to suggest that culture plays a part, but I fear that we are missing something very important if we think that it is significant in delivering quality.

To attribute the success of the quality process to the differences in culture is superficial and misleading and may cause an attempt to "fix what isn't broken."

It is perhaps possible for quality efforts to be impeded in situations where you find that levels of management are dominated by one cultural group. Organizations fool themselves about being in pursuit of quality while refusing to make sure that all levels of the organization reflect the diversity of its workforce and community.

In Nigeria the divisiveness is along tribal lines. In South Africa it is a combination of race and tribes. In both situations the stratification has its impact on quality efforts. But, to attribute the effects to simply cultural differences is narrow thinking.

What seems to be more of an influencing variable is the attitude of the leadership. Leaders who straddle the fence and do not set the pace to pursue aggressively a quality culture that transcends protecting certain groups are destined to take their company down the tubes.

The focus of leadership or top-management should be on transforming the organization to a quality culture that positions customers at the center. A culture of quality permeating the organization would be more in line with the attitude that makes a significant difference in delivering quality.



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