



TOTAL QUALITY: CONTINUOUS PROCESS IS THE SUCCESS KEY

Memo: Quality at Work

Edition: Final

It has been said that the total quality management process is simple, or nothing more than common sense. But the fact is that continuous improvement, the heart of total quality, is anything but natural, common or simple.

We really have two jobs. Doing the job as described is one. Continuously making improvements to the job is the other. But merely doing the job is the natural order of business in Nigeria at the moment.

The employee who relentlessly pursues improvements runs the risk of being an outcast if the organization has not transformed its culture for continuous improvement. The if-it-ain't-broke-don't-fix-it syndrome will be the norm. Improvement almost invariably will be limited to putting out fires.

One of my clients, for instance, produced an item that was supposed to revolve without wobbling. It was common knowledge that wobble would cause the customer problems. However, engineering had specified that a certain amount of wobble was acceptable and proceeded to write specifications allowing some wobble. Efforts to reduce the wobble to zero were abandoned in favor of meeting specs.

On a different note, I recall conducting a seminar for a group of educators who accepted the fact that a percentage of students would not graduate or would fall through the cracks. Not only could they predict the percentage, they were also fairly certain they knew who would fall, and through what cracks. Continuous improvement would have had them working to fill the cracks instead of accepting them.

In business, the natural tendency over time is to increase fees charged customers, regardless of whether improvements are made in processes or products. If continuous improvement were in place, the opposite would be true. Because reduced costs and higher productivity result from continuous improvement, fee-linked costs would go down.

The path taken to continuous improvement by successful organizations is well defined. The sequence begins with deciding what to work on first. There are many tools and techniques geared toward this endeavor. Perhaps the most common is brainstorming. Ideas come from team brainstorming, but other tools are used to learn the facts about a subject.

The next step is finding those facts, as well as causes and effects. Tools such as the fishbone diagram are ideal at this stage. While simple to construct, this tool is often omitted.

The third step in the sequence involves evaluating progress of the project using measurements determined at the beginning. And the final step is planning for continuous improvement and holding the gains.



Care must be taken to not be content with mere improved performance. Most opportunities will require several rounds of improvement. There is always the trap of thinking "that's good enough," while the competition pursues never- ending improvement. These steps aren't simple, and they don't come naturally. But to prosper, and in some cases survive, organizations must develop the culture, discipline and process for continuous improvement.

*Submitted by **Afolabi Imoukhuede**, Managing Consultant, MCS Consulting Limited Ikoyi, Lagos
aimoukhuede@mcsworldgrp.com*

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