



TOTAL QUALITY: GOOD BUSINESS IS 'GOOD TO THE EMPLOYEES'

Memo: Quality at Work

Edition: Final

Don't count me among those who approve of the conventional wisdom that "power corrupts." I simply don't accept that as necessarily true. But in the area of Total Quality Management, a variation of that old adage is more credible. Absolute power does corrupt - absolutely.

Organizations in which real power is monopolized by a few never serve as models of efficiency and productivity. Concentrated power is a poisonous, counterproductive approach to managing a business.

Traditional management teachings focus on planning, organizing, staffing and controlling. What bothers me is that managers often interpret very narrowly their task to exercise control, particularly as it relates to human resources.

Too many managers have exclusive power to make critical decisions and judgments.

Implicit in this approach is that managers know most and know best. This narrow definition of control stifles the creativity and productivity of the workforce.

Total quality management advocates empowerment for all employees - empowerment that makes workers eager to initiate problem solving and more likely to pursue the constant improvement that is fundamental to a vibrant, customer-oriented enterprise.

Real empowerment comes when employees are not occasionally asked their opinions (often management's attempt to appease), but when they participate in the meaningful decisions, from establishing policy to shutting down a faulty process. Quality guru J. M. Juran points out that employees must have the authority to take corrective actions.

The Whirlpool Corp. plant in Oxford, Miss., several years ago began phasing out traditional plant supervisors and empowering hourly workers with broader responsibilities, from hiring and firing to running assembly lines. Costs and accident rates went down, and product quality rose. An almost festive energy among the workers took hold.

The founder of Wal-Mart (one of the largest departmental store house in the US), the late Sam Walton, wrote in his autobiography, *Made in America*: "There is absolutely no limit to what plain, or ordinary, working people can accomplish if they're given the opportunity and the encouragement to do their best." How true. I have seen employees come alive simply because management sought greater participation from them or because they were encouraged to work on a quality action or improvement team. It was as though their very existence had been recognized. An employee of an area school district told me that "just not being disregarded" was enough to motivate her.

Unquestionably, the concepts of empowerment and traditional management control are incompatible.



And making the transition to empowerment is not easy. It will require a great deal of retraining. But drastic change is necessary. Traditional management tendencies to forgo unlocking human creativity in favor of exerting control must be dealt a fatal blow. For the organizations that successfully empower their people will make the greatest strides in performance and competitiveness.

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