

Total Quality for a Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Back to Basics

Abstract

Over the last couple of decades there has been an explosion of articles on the latest Quality trends. These include: Lean Six Sigma, Design for Six Sigma, reengineering, balanced scorecards, multi-model process improvement frameworks, CMMI and ISO initiatives. The list goes on and on. Sometimes, however, it pays to go back to the basics—to the roots that enabled America to compete with the Japanese in the 80's.

A relentless focus on Quality has emerged as the universal strategy to ensure a company's survival and competitive position. The Baldrige Award, the Deming Prize, and a proliferation of State Quality Awards offer impressive incentives to improve an organization's reputation. Despite such incentives, there are many companies that have not embraced "Total Quality" as framework for continual improvement.

Total Quality—A Better Way to Manage

Total Quality is a management philosophy that focuses on a customer-driven approach to continual improvement. Continual improvement implies that everything a company does—every product, service or business process—can be improved forever. This improvement occurs in two phases: a critical sequence of management improvement first, from which product and service improvement follows.

Interestingly, the emphasis on Total Quality is more about a management system than on specific improvement opportunities. When you use Total Quality as a business strategy, continual improvement is achieved by involving everyone in the organization in a daily search for incremental improvements. Everyone focuses on customer (internal and external) requirements and on performance objectives.

The Management System

A comprehensive management system must extend throughout the organization. An effective system produces a work climate conducive to solving chronic problems, developing innovative processes, and harnessing the hearts and minds of every worker. That's the continual improvement power. Also, the management system must change the focus and order of work from the individual to the team.

The management system is developed through the existing organizational structure. Staff meetings are an integral part of the functioning system. Vertical and horizontal communication is improved dramatically, setting the stage for the emergence of high-

performance, “natural” work teams. Complex interdepartmental or cross-functional problems may be assigned to action teams in high-opportunity areas.

The Work Climate

Your organization’s culture is shaped, to a large extent, by management style. A command and control philosophy should be replaced with coaching and mentoring. That means leading by example and rolling up your sleeves. Managers in traditional positions of command tend to believe they have direct control. But this is just an illusion. Employees lend their greatest support to objectives they help set.

The success of any organization depends, to a great extent, on the effectiveness of its communication system. Obviously, information flowing from the top down must be clear. But information flowing upwards also must be free of distortion—that is, the channels must be open to worker ideas and concerns. And multidirectional communication goes a long way to doing the right job right the first time.

Process Improvement

Unfortunately, line and staff departments have become too myopic or insular. Process management is imperative in order to manage and improve cross-functional business processes. And the more process-centric an organization is, the more performance-driven it will be. If you think you can be customer-centric, without being process-centric—think again. Processes must put the customer first.

The stark reality is, processes (especially cross-functional processes) are usually not documented, not systematically and continually improved, and not managed. So why improve and manage processes? Simply, processes are the fundamental building blocks for achieving business results—and streamlined processes are critical to building and maintaining a competitive edge.

The Path Forward

Implementing a continual improvement initiative can be compared with a large ocean-going ship changing course. Considerable force must be exerted. When charting a new course, extreme care must be taken to ensure that the direction is correct and that the course is completely understood and fully accepted. It must be a practical, effective course that employees will be motivated to travel.

You will need to pay careful attention to every phase of developing and implementing the system. Your continual improvement effort must involve teamwork across the organization. It will mean change—in how you manage, in how you treat your employees, in how you view waste and inefficiency. It will mean going beyond supporting Total Quality to actively participating in it.

About the Author

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Stan has more than three decades of business and consulting experience, in both the private and public sectors, in the United States and abroad. Stan specializes in building high-performance teams, and working closely with senior leaders to achieve breakthrough financial, organizational, and operating improvement. He has been quoted in many business publications, including *Fortune*, *Business Week* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

About Change Management Consulting, Inc. (CMC)

Founded in 1993, Change Management Consulting is a global management consulting and training company, dedicated to helping organizations of all sizes improve performance, achieve goals and advance leadership capability. As a full-service organizational improvement firm, CMC focuses on organizational and leadership development, compliance management (ISO 9001 and its derivatives), strategic planning and Lean Six Sigma initiatives.

Headquartered in Wayne, NJ with offices in San Diego, Dallas and Detroit, CMC has a proven track record in helping public and private sector clients implement pragmatic continual improvement initiatives that drive financially measurable results. CMC also has extensive experience in obtaining grants and funding assistance for its clients. Learn more at www.cmc-changemanagement.com or contact CMC at (877) 268-2440 or (973) 696-7878.