



FINDING SELF IN THE NUTS AND BOLTS Hidden Quality in a Service Organization.

(Why there are no assurances of quality and quality control is absurd)

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FINDING SELF IN THE NUTS AND BOLTS – HIDDEN QUALITY IN THE SERVICE ORGANIZATION



The discernment of Quality is difficult at best. Intuitively, we are aware of it when we perceive it, and we understand it as a characteristic of some *thing*, but that what it truly is transcends our understanding of the ordinary. It is difficult to define, though can be alluded to in absolute terms. It is an everyday word in one sense and in another speaks about the essential nature of all things; universal, ethereal, and all-pervasive. It contains a sense of the sacred, but belies its own origins. Where it dwells remains in obscurity alongside such terms as Truth and Beauty. We are able to distinguish quality from less-than-quality but we suffer to describe it as a thing-in-itself. Definitions abound; conformance with requirements, defect-free production, a degree of excellence, and Excellence itself. It has even been said that Quality is the *expression* of human Excellence. It is not just a characteristic of a thing (i.e. a quality of a grass is green); it underlies all things which seek and embody Perfection. However, pure Quality is unattainable; an ideal that we can only strive to emulate. This idyllic principle should be differentiated from the term we use to describe the quality of things, and by “things”, we mean more than just objects and products; we mean shapes, forms, spaces, perceptions, sensations, words, ideas, and the plethora of phenomena that make up our existence. At this level, language fails to illuminate the essence of these things and just describing their properties can not inform us of their true nature and meaning.

Quality lays in silence amidst the duality of our existence, in the void - the unfamiliar space between each moment, each thought, each image; the moment between two heart beats, between two breaths; the moment when Blake’s “eternity can be contained in an hour”.¹ It is the pause which embodies the eternal character of Quality. That rich potential of Nothingness, pregnant and swollen with anticipation, unmarred by being and becoming. Before sound, there is only silence, and from the depths of this silence images emerge.

Quality, like silence, is immeasurable. Measuring implies a physical or linguistic act of calculating a dimension or a perception of scale, and is thus inadequate to quantify that which relies on our conscious recognition for its existence. Measuring quality is not the same as measuring the depth of the ocean, or the length of an eon. Quality can only be “measured” the way one would measure the quality of a daydream, or the quality of light in a Rembrandt painting. In other words, it can not be measured as much as it can be scrutinized. Absolute Quality can be discussed as having unconditional significance, as a backdrop to reality, or as an all-pervasive flow of energy. It may “sing” to us or pluck the strings of our souls, but it can not be isolated and gauged as a thing-in-itself as if it were a feature of an object. So be it, then, how can we assess the qualities and quality of Quality?



As it appears, our efforts to probe the ethereal domain of Quality shed little light on how we might measure quality in an organization, a production system, or a set of construction documents. How true it may be, then, that our requirements for quality control in our organizations are ultimately and tiredly absurd. For how does one control that which can not truly be understood? How does one make assurances of that which does not exist outside of our scrutiny? For this we must return to the Earth, and shift our thought from the absolute to the relative, and leave those “charming gardeners”² to tend to our souls.


Ordinarily, we believe the meaning of quality to be synonymous with good, but good can only be defined in subjective and associative terms. It must be measured against something else, and since *good* is different for everyone, it is not, therefore, a good enough term to define Quality. Being good is the lowest level of acceptable competency. In this relative sense, the quality which we choose to raise for the better performance of our products, equipment, processes and systems more closely resembles what we define as Value. It is this latter type that affects our personal and professional relationships and decisions about our products and services. Henry Ford defined quality as “doing it right even when no one is looking”. His definition requires personal acumen, discipline, integrity, and self-management - a measurement that each of us holds independent of one another and a discernment of personal value each of us places upon the thing. Value in this sense is synonymous with taste, and taste is a product of environmental, cultural, and moral experiences.


The quality or value of a product or service refers to the perception of the degree to which the product or service meets the customer's expectations. It may therefore be deduced, the only true definition of quality is provided by the customer. This customer-centric approach requires a new definition; one that releases us of our historical associations and biases, and allows us to experience the space, object, or thing without these preconceived notions. The customer experience is the aggregate of all the touch points that customers have with the company's product and services, and is by definition a combination of these. For example, any time one buys a product or hires a service one forms an impression based on how it was sold, how it was delivered, how it performed, how well it was supported, etc. Be aware, this new approach must reach higher beyond customer satisfaction, as satisfaction is a form of complacency, and contentment breeds weariness. Therefore this approach must mark more than just customer satisfaction. It must gauge the things conformance with market standards, standard of care, program requirements, and ease of production.


In the past, when we tried to improve quality, typically defined as producing fewer defective parts, we did so at the expense of increased cost, increased task time, longer cycle time, etc. We could not get fewer defective parts and at the same time get lower cost and shorter cycle times, and so on. However, when modern quality techniques are applied correctly to business, engineering, manufacturing or assembly processes, all aspects of quality - customer satisfaction *and* fewer defects/errors *and* cycle time *and* task time/productivity *and* total cost, etc. - must all improve or, if one of these aspects does not improve, it must at least stay stable and not decline. So, modern quality has the characteristic that it creates AND-based benefits, not OR-based benefits. To increase value, or worth, and to meet customer expectations, quality needs to increase. For quality to improve, costs, lead times, *and* errors must decrease. Quality is the sum of these facets, but it is pointless without the subjective acceptance of its value by the customer. Increasing Value, therefore, is our ultimate aim.


Inevitably, one must know his client in order to deliver the Value they expect. Always ask who is the customer? The word “customer” comes from the Latin word for “custom” or “habit”, habitual patronage; to become used to, or to repeat a certain action frequently. More literally, a customer is anyone TO whom you provide goods, services, or information on an on-going basis; the aggregate of which become what is referred to as a customer chain. Someone provides a portion of the product to me upon which I alter or annotate. I in turn pass it along to the next person in the chain who in turn alters and annotates, who then provides it to the next link in the chain, and so on until completion. Regardless of where in the process you fit, you are ultimately responsible for your portion of the quality process. This is not a linear equation; we are at all times receiving and providing information and services from and to every direction. Our effect is universal. We create value for others by providing them with correct, clear, concise and complete information so that they are then able to do their job more accurately and efficiently. This three-dimensional model moving through time makes up the totality of our influence upon others, and in itself is not only a function of business, it is a spiritual aphorism.


The most efficient way to establish quality is not to attempt to control the outcome of the product, but to establish control over the process of its production. If the process is under control, inspection is not necessary, and quality control is irrelevant. Process control searches for means to reduce errors and defects by building a better production system rather than emphasizing the betterment of the product. A review of the process can elucidate anomalies in the systems which are the cause for poor quality output. It is at these glitches where quality breaks down and a system becomes underutilized. Improving quality, once assessed within the process, is the inevitable next stage in the evolution of the quality management process. Reducing variation, reducing errors and defects, attacking waste, unblocking process constraints and mistake-proofing will build-in value for your customers. These ideas need further examination:

 Variation is defined as the difference between what or how we tried to make something and what or how we actually made it. Precision is the opposite of variation and is maintained through consistency, uniformity, and standardization. Specified/acceptable tolerances keep variation from harming the process. A precise process has very little variation. Some examples include scope creep, re-inventing the wheel, use of non-standard details, materials, products, processes, and procedures, poor project planning, and hopping team members.

 There is an adage that goes, “Why do we always have time to do things over, but never have time to do it right?” It exemplifies how defects caught after the fact are costly and lead to failure. A defect is defined as a malfunction that prevents the product or service from being acceptable to the customer. Along with conforming to program requirements, conforming to the requirements of the customer includes utilizing proper code analysis, industry standards, and standard office procedures. Variation and errors are sibling concepts, the control of which will insure quality products and customer delight.

 Waste can be defined as anything which does not add value to a product or service in any activity which does not help conformance with customer requirements, or any activity the customer would be unwilling to pay you to do. Examples include rework and scraping of work, undisciplined progress meetings, excessive paperwork systems and approval processes, unnecessary motion or inadequate work space, uncontrolled fraternization within the office, “busy” work, unorganized resources, running down “rabbit” holes, and ambivalence towards company protocols concerning quality management.

 Constraints are the unplanned places in the system that set the pace for every activity that comes after it. Process constraints occur at the project transition points; points where the product passes from one set of processes to another, from one phase to another, or from one person to another. Communication fails, schedules are adjusted or postponed, cost estimates are adjusted, scope is redefined, etc. Passing through sub-par products will only exponentially explode the weaknesses as the product moves throughout the process.

 Developing built-in process filters, or “mistake-proofing” will not allow products which do not meet the standards to be passed through until they are corrected. These triggers allow for the non-linear stream of information to be controlled throughout the process rather than at the end after the mistakes have already been made. If we manage the bottlenecks, and build-in quality to the process, the rest of the process will run smoothly on its own.

In the end, Quality remains amorphous and nearly indefinable, yet its offspring are born into this world of objects as characteristics of those objects and as a divining rod towards a more perfect state. It is not the path; it is not the summit; it is the signpost along the way. We can set up criteria for assessing its level of conformance with ideals, but it can not be measured against these ideals, for it is the ideal in itself. It is not something that can be controlled, however, it is something that can be caused, and therefore must be managed. More importantly it must be led. We come close to touching it when we listen for the choir of Angels in the breeze and the rustling of the leaves.

End Notes

1. William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, ca. 1805.
2. Marcel Proust, "Let us be grateful to people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom".

Credits

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