Bringing Quality to Life

A broader look at quality management

When Dave Brubeck wrote Take Five, Columbia Records were not impressed and initially blocked its release. The song went on to become the first million-selling 'jazz' record and stayed in the charts for 15 weeks, possibly the only hit in a 5/4 time signature. The prime number 5 has a long history of significance; described by Pythagoras as "the number of man" due to the human being having five main senses, five main organs and five digits on each arm and limb.

But the significance of five doesn't stop there. There are the Five Classical Elements, the Five Basic Directions of Orientation, the Five Life Stages, the Five Oceans, the Five Virtues, the Five Stages of Spiritual Growth, the Five Buddhist Precepts and Stages of Meditation and the Five vows of Jainism - even The Ten Commandments were said to be presented to Moses in two stones of five. The Bahai scriptures talk of the Five Prophets, there are the Five Books of the Old Testament and there are of five lines in the musical stave.

So in keeping with tradition I first applied the number 5 to quality management and came up with a self-assessment tool called SCORE that enabled companies to rate themselves on five characteristics. But this fell into the trap of separating 'quality' from 'business' - it is all too easy to hire quality managers and stick them in the corner of organisations and say "please look after quality". And so because quality is everyone's responsibility I now use the number five to cover the following broader aspects of a business:

The 5 components (of a business management system)
The 5 conversations (of a business manager)
The 5 characteristics (of a business)

Let's look at these groups in turn.

The 5 key components of an integrated business management system

QMS	quality management system
FMS	financial management system
CSR	corporate social responsibility (profile)
ISMS	information security management system
PMS	performance management system

Building a QMS using the traditional principles of quality management ensures that the system is centred round the market it operates in and facilitates a culture of continual improvement. Once this is embedded, an organisation can apply for an ISO 9001 quality certificate should they want to.

Building an ISMS using the key principles of information security ensures that the system is designed to protect the organisation's "CIA" – the confidentiality, integrity and availability of information – and doing that engenders 'a culture of privacy'. Once this is embedded, an organisation can apply for an ISO 27001 certificate to add further steel to its tender process.

A robust financial management system is imperative of course, but one that not only covers the fundamentals such as payroll and invoicing but that also facilitates accurate reporting, analysis and forecasting. Finance managers with a broader business understanding – i.e. quality and operations management - tend to have more of an impact in the organisation.

A PMS underpins the other components by incorporating a competency framework, productive appraisals, 360 degree feedback and 'a coaching style of leadership' amongst department heads. Social Responsibility doesn't need to be created or established for it already exists in the hearts of every member of staff looking for meaning in their jobs and for a way to make a positive contribution. This just needs to be realised and encouraged. CSR (ISO 26000) covers ethical business practices, contributions to community projects, the reduction of environmental impacts (ISO 14001), the management of health and safety (BS OHSAS 18001), and other causes that organisation wants to sponsor or get involved in. The aim is to get each component to harmonise and become fully integrated for maximum efficiency and so that there can be mutual learning from each component.

The 5 characteristics of a business

If you go to a football match there is always a supporter who, in spite of watching the game for 60 minutes will lose track and ask "what's the score?". Similarly, you can run a company for a few years and easily lose track of where you are and where it is you are trying to go. Many companies conduct a self-assessment or audit to 'put a stake in the ground' and gauge where they are in terms of both business and quality management. The SCORE self-assessment tool is divided into the following categories:

Service – **this category looks at the overall level of service perceived by the customer through the various access channels - i.e. the business website, the company switchboard, the complaints department and the various social media platforms. These interfaces can often provide the customer with an instant perception of how an organisation conducts its business, even if it does not represent the full picture.**

Communication – **this is specifically about the quality of conversations across the organisation – i.e. the way internal meetings are conducted, the way messages are communicated to staff, building relationships with suppliers, understanding the customer to effectively determine their needs and keeping in touch with all relevant parties during the relevant life stages of a project or sale.**

Output – **this is the end product (or 'specific service') provided to the client this is what ultimately determines whether the customer's needs have been met – it could be a car, a bottle of wine, a book, a data report, property, technical repairs, a maintenance contract etc. Two critical procedures must be in place: *verification* (checking that the output meets the input – i.e. the initial request or specifications) and *validation* (checking that the output is fit for purpose – i.e. does what the customers wants it to do.**

Recruitment & Retention – **this is about accurately identifying the type of staff required and the competencies they should have; an effective screening process that gets the right people in the right positions is essential and then following up with an on-going learning and development programme that keeps motivation levels up can be a deal-breaker in terms of sustained performance. As inappropriate leadership can chip away at the loyalty of talented people, department heads need the right kind of training before their direct reports become examples of bad management stories they tell later in their career.**

Environment – **this is about the infrastructure of the organisation – i.e. the performance of tools & equipment, IT systems, software etc.; it is also about the daily working environment – i.e. safe and tidy work areas, appropriate temperature levels and orderly filing systems. Humans not happy in their environment rarely work to their potential.**

<u>The 5 conversations of a business manager</u>

Customer	(determining their needs and making sure their needs are met)
Learning	(coaching, training and mentoring staff)
Auditing	(‘improvement conversations’ that check on quality levels)
Strategic	(short and long term planning)
Supplier	(evaluating, selecting and monitoring)

When we talk about ISO and ‘systems’ we run the risk of alienating people and turning business and quality management into a world full of rules and documentation. But ISO has changed a lot since the last quarter of the twentieth century, is now lighter in documentation and has a new focus on effective communication. Management for me is a series of effective conversations and the more productive that each conversation is the more productive the organisation will be. These conversations form into the above groups.

Conversations with customers begin with an accurate determination of their needs and their expectations and then to ensure that they are kept informed throughout the process so that their initial needs and expectations are ultimately met and hopefully exceeded.

Conversations with suppliers should start with the intention of generating something that is ‘mutually beneficial’ (one of the core quality management principles). From the customer’s point of view this should incorporate evaluation, selection and monitoring to ensure that the supplier delivers something that supports the requirements of the end client.

For the business to become ‘a learning organisation’ it needs to hold meaningful and **Learning Conversations** with staff by choosing the appropriate intervention; training (the passing of specific skills), mentoring (guidance from an experienced colleague) or coaching (facilitation with a view to greater levels of empowerment and accountability).

The organisation can also learn through its internal (and external) auditing programmes and should view these audits as **Improvement conversations**. Auditors can become the organisation’s best friends by not only uncovering serious issues but by helping to determine the root causes of problems so that their recurrence can be prevented.

Strategic conversations are the conversations that define an organisation. If meetings amongst top management are allowed to become perfunctory and superficial reviews of meaningless data, opportunities to have creative and enterprising discussions can be lost. Sometimes quality needs to be 'sold' again to employees.

In order to fully understand customer satisfaction, management can hold meaningful conversations about quality and ask employees what quality means to them; what brands they admire and how they want to *feel* as customers so that they can be inspired to deliver that same service back to the customers they serve.

This is how organisations can enhance quality through the energy of conversation and through fostering a culture of social responsibility can bring quality to life in more ways than one.

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