

Measuring Quality With a Football Bat

BY MIKE SUTTON

In American industry, phrases like Total Quality Management (TQM), zero defects and six sigma have become as trendy as pet rocks, nose piercing and crushed rhinoceros horn. Unfortunately, many of these programs have been about as useless. In fact, sometimes quality can actually be decreased in the act of trying to enhance it.

The title of this month's column sounds silly, but it's true. Sometimes, very bright people will apply an assessment vehicle designed for one environment to a completely different situation.

For example, several years ago, one icon of American industry decided to institute a six sigma quality program. If you eliminate the mathematical mumbo-jumbo, six sigma roughly equates to less than four defects, failures or errors per million activities. For instance, if a manufacturing company makes ball bearings, less than four could be out of tolerance for every million produced for that company to meet its six sigma quality objective.

With noble intentions, this company applied the six sigma standard equally to marketing, manufacturing, technical support and administration's ranks. To its credit, the company actually spent money educating employees on the rudiments of statistics such as distributions and standard deviation.

However, many employees came away from these classes with two distinct impressions:

1. The company's objective was impossible to achieve. A switchboard operator would have to make hundreds of thousands of error-free connections to make up for a single mistake.
2. The company wasn't really serious about quality.

Unfortunately, corporate impatience forced this education to be conducted so quickly that classes designed to pump employees up were fairly shabby. In some cases, the transparencies used were difficult to read and contained numerous typos.

In short, the six sigma standard was an appropriate goal for part of the company but not all of it. America's corporate "one-size-

fits-all" approach had struck again. More about that next month.

A byproduct of the "football bat" syndrome is the inverse: coups — executives usurping line management's responsibilities. This usually happens when some relatively small part of an organization gets misguided, intense attention, and measurement by a corporate-level organization.

One company decided that "telephone quality" in its marketing organization was a major problem because customer surveys indicated a dissatisfaction with communications.

This corporation established a Telephone Project Office, with a large staff to make random test calls to marketing offices across the United States. The exercise was designed to see if:

1. The greeting on the employee's telephone answering machine indicated the current date; if the employee was in or out of the office; who his/her back-up was; and, of major importance, how long the caller could expect to wait for a return call (i.e., two hours or by the end of the day).
2. An actual human back-up (other than the company operator) would answer within two transfers, assuming a caller needed immediate access to that organization.

The "phone police" never checked to see if customers' calls were actually returned within the time frame or not. Line managers spent a great deal of time following up on reports that their employees' had not passed their phone "audit." This telephone quality project survived downsizing activities when other revenue-generating organizations were severely reduced or eliminated.

The customer's original "communication" complaint had far more to do with the marketing field force's inability to discuss technical issues, due to lack of time and skills.

QUALITY PRODUCED BY PRIDE


It is difficult, at best, to produce a quality product or service without an amalgam of employee pride. People who feel their actions strengthen the department's output will almost

always work longer, harder and with more diligence than those who don't.

This self-esteem isn't magic however. It starts with a foundation of pride in the company's products or services, and builds on it. A program that proves the company is willing to invest in quality can serve as an after-burner to boost people's self-respect, morale, and ultimately, profits.

Because of their close proximity to a company's output, employees are almost always the first to recognize performance, lacking capability or product integrity issues. They can also detect the odor of anything other than a genuine improvement program quicker than the smell of a road-kill skunk.

Yes, there is a point in here somewhere! If you're at the "rubber-meets-the-road" end of your company's products and/or services, your input on issues is important. Not only in terms of quality, but also in terms of value. There are a lot of solutions in today's marketplace looking for a problem.

As Ralph T. Flewelling said, "Some values are ... like sugar on the doughnut ... legitimate, desirable, but insufficient, apart from the doughnut itself. We need substance as well as frosting." I couldn't have said it better myself, Ralphie Boy! 



NaSPA member Mike Sutton's Vietnam novel, No Survivors (ISBN 0- 8338-0226-7) is available from Marshall Jones Co. at (800) 258-1505. Mike is donating 33 percent of the royalties from his book to the Center for Homeless Veterans.

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