

Designed LearningSM

**Consulting
Skills
Make
Quality
Happen**



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Consulting Skills Make Quality Happen

The role of “quality consultant” is evolving. While many organizations in the past had “quality control” or “quality assurance” groups, the present function of quality consultant is significantly different.

Individuals viewed the previous role as controller, auditor, and policeman even though everyone agreed the intention of high quality was a good one.

Now companies charge quality consultants with the task of going to every part of the organization as advocates for increasing the quality effort. It is no longer a matter of **doing it to** the organization. Now it is a matter of **working with** the organizations to make quality a way of life.

This new approach requires a change in the way people perceive the role of quality consultants. The new perspective also sets new expectations about how consultants interact with their “clients or customers” in the organization.

CONCERN FOR QUALITY

Quality concerns grow broader and deeper each year. Technology proliferates; its applications expand. Quality, in this era of sharply increased competition, reaches far beyond the products themselves. Quality today encompasses the performance not only of the

product people but also of support personnel. *“Everyone in an organization has suppliers and customers. Wherever a supplier/customer relationship exists, quality can be defined and tracked,”* says Randy Trombly, an internal consultant with Compaq Computers.

The marketplace constantly redefines quality. *“As our customers get smarter,”* says John Barr, Manager of Quality Consulting for Xerox Corporation’s U.S. Marketing Group, *“they are thinking of new ways of doing business. They are looking for quality in total customer support. Quality is not a buzzword. Quality means conforming to customer requirements. As our customers discover new and unique requirements, we have to be constantly changing to meet them.”* Change is rarely easy.

No one can be against quality, of course – it is like “motherhood” or “goodness.” Yet integrating a

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philosophy of quality into the productivity of all employees in the organization is easier said than done. Quality consultants believe in the importance of quality; they are the “champions of the quality effort”. They have the technology, the tools, and the ability to help. But they are not always met with open arms. Frequently this is a cause of

disappointment and frustration for the quality consultant.

NEW WAYS TO INTERACT NEEDED

Quality consultants come with different experiences and expertise. Some come from line functions, and others from previously existing staff organizations. Although many receive training in quality methodologies, few have had the opportunity to develop the skills to be effective as consultants.

Quality consultants need to develop new ways of interacting within the organization so that ideas and changes are implemented. Basically, these are the skills to manage relationships in the organization so their expertise will be used.

Quality consultants adapting to changes in their field face uncertainty and conflict. The roles of staff quality consultants and the boundaries in which they operate are not fully agreed upon. Clients with whom they consult, top management, and even consultants themselves view the role differently.

Sometimes conflict occurs over turf with people asking themselves, is this a human resources, operations, safety, manufacturing, or quality issue?

In other cases, managers in departments not directly related to the company’s products or customers have difficulty viewing quality as their concern.

Prospective clients may see quality consultants as advocates for processes driven from above and, therefore, out of touch with the floor level. Besides, clients

may not totally understand the value of quality technology. They may well wonder, what's in it for them? Reports and programs may be politely received and then left to gather dust on shelves. Quality consultants often suffer burnout.

Staff quality consultants have to influence their clients, who typically are higher level managers and over whom they have no authority or direct control. In addition, they may be called in or sent to a particular client to solve a problem or effect a change.

There may be other, unspecified clients they must reach to be successful. For example, the people from whom the consultant must get information and all the people who will actually be implementing quality measures.

Consultants must identify these people, win access to them, win their trust, and contract with them as partners to solve problems. The critical factor in

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bringing about a commitment to change is creating relationships where clients allow consultants to influence them.

CREATING RELATIONSHIPS

“As staff consultants,” says Barr, whose company won a 1989 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, “we need to understand our clients’ motives. Why do they do what they do?”

Then we use those motives to provide them what they need to achieve their objectives. That’s why we went to Designed Learning’s Staff Consulting Skills workshops – to try to get our people to understand how to consult with clients about quality, how to communicate that there’s something in it for them.”

Compaq’s Trombly explains, “the quality consultant needs to answer the question, what will the employee gain by participating in a quality effort. In order to achieve employee buy-in, quality consultants need to communicate key concepts and let employee work groups define how the concepts will be integrated”.

DEALING WITH RESISTANCE

A major consulting issue is dealing with client resistance, a predictable, normal, and necessary reaction against the process of being helped. Resistance can come about for many reasons such as fear of losing control or of having to face up to difficult organizational problems.

Resistance to change itself is one of the main reasons clients withhold commitment to quality measures. “This resistance”, says Barr, “comes about because people say to themselves, ‘I know the rules of the game I am currently playing, but I don’t know the rules of the new game and I’m not sure I can win in the new game’. As consultants, we find ourselves constantly trying to understand the resistance of our clients. We want to help

them recognize that their resistance is healthy and normal. We offer alternatives to this we-can’t-change attitude. We show them ways they can change that will enable them to be successful in the new way,” says Barr.

To minimize resistance, consultants must first understand their clients’ vulnerability. For example, managers sometimes feel vulnerable because poor quality results may be interpreted as their own poor management. Consultants are sometimes seen as spies trying to find fault. Getting people to talk about these concerns requires compassionate listening skills.

In one company, a consultant was about to help a young manager implement a change on a manufacturing line to improve quality. The manager said he was very interested in improving quality, but this particular week he was swamped with customer orders and didn’t have time to talk about the new measures. The next week proved to be equally unsuitable, as did the next. Finally, the client explained that “in the real world,” manufacturers just didn’t have time to devote to quality consultants.

This resistance was a clear sign that the manager faced some difficult realities in his department, painful problems that seemed to require painful solutions. The consultant had to lead the manager to see that his resistance had less to do with time constraints than with discomfort the new quality measures caused him.

Skillfully approached, in a way that supported the manager's concerns, the young manager finally confessed he felt intimidated by an older, entrenched foreman whose role would have to be changed by the

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new quality measures. He expected that the shift in the way work is done would be unpleasant for the foreman. The manager feared he would not do a good job in convincing the foreman that the changes were necessary, and it would make him look like a bad manager.

Once the manager's defensive pretexts were dropped, the consultant could help him deal with these natural emotions as well as the implementation of the quality measure.

“Designed Learning's workshops help people learn that resistance is not something the consultant must 'overcome' says Trombly. “The process of dealing with resistance helps the client move from a position of helplessness, alienation, and confusion to a position of choice, engagement, and clarity.”

TRUE CONSULTANTS

Staff Quality consultants also learn how to contract with upper management to function in the role of true consultants. They learn to guard against any role that conflicts with their consultant status.

For example, they must avoid becoming “a pair of hands” doing for their clients what their clients should be doing for themselves. They also learn to avoid taking the role of “the expert,” who only makes recommendations instead of winning collaboration. They learn how and when to say no.

At Alcoa Laboratories, a quality consultant, called a Quality Facilitator, assists an improvement team in problem solving. *“Often the team will attempt to transfer the responsibility for solving the*

“It is critical that the consultant confront the team's attempt to transfer responsibility.”

problem to the Quality Facilitator”, says Jim Ice, Alcoa's Coordinator, Professional Development. “This is a trap many new facilitators fall into. Wanting to help the team, they 'own' the problem and take that responsibility from the team. The team is now free to maintain the status quo by rejecting the 'consultant's solution.' It is critical that the consultant confront the team's attempt to transfer responsibility. The facilitator”, says Ice, “must establish the team's ownership of the problem and thereby increase the team's energy and urgency to develop and implement a solution.”

In Trombly's words, *“The manager's role is to serve the*

team rather than lead the team.”

The role of consultant also means promoting their services up front rather than just reacting to crises. It means educating clients to think and breathe quality while they do business.

Quality is a way of thinking about work and not just when they are filling out an application for the Baldrige Award. It means becoming 50-50 partners with clients. Being a true consultant means obtaining information on the big picture instead of just the presenting problem, and applying a long range view – in short, acting strategically.

“In summary”, says Barr, “the companies who are going to be successful in the nineties and beyond are the companies that truly understand what the customer wants, needs and expects, today, six months from now, and five years from now. They are constantly improving the quality of their product and service in that direction. These companies must have a cadre of people who are always on the elite edge, consistently 15 to 20 steps ahead of the rest of the world. These people must work as true consultants to bring their clients, with all their knowledge and their expertise, to a point 5 to 6 steps ahead of the industry.”

Being a ‘true consultant’ doesn't just happen, anymore than quality just happens; it has to be learned.

THE BALDRIGE IMPACT

“One tool which helps companies improve quality in a systematic way is the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. The development of the Baldrige Award is the factor which has had the biggest single impact on the quality field in recent years.”

The award program provides a way to look at a company systematically, moving from the level of mere quality slogans to real criteria. Filling out an application for the award in itself has become a practical method of self-examination and goal setting.

The Baldrige Award helps quality specialists “understand what things we need to improve and to differentiate between those that are educational in nature and those that are fundamental changes in the way we operate our company,” says John Barr, a Quality Consultant from Xerox, whose company won the 1989 Baldrige Award. However, when application for the award is focused on using official criteria **only** to create an award-winning perception, quality as a pervasive way of doing business is often neglected.

It is not the job of the true quality consultant to spearhead the effort to get the award; it is the job of the quality consultant to persuade people to buy into the concept of thinking, breathing, and living quality. Clients must see quality, not just as a program, but as a way of doing business. They need to view themselves as partners with a stake in making quality happen.

For additional copies contact:

**Designed Learning Inc.
313 South Avenue
Suite 202
Fanwood, NJ 07023
908-889-0300
908-889-4995
E-Mail:
Info@DesignedLearning.com**