Guest Editorial

TQM: Quality Improvement in New Clothes

The total quality management (TQM) movement is alive and thriving throughout the Fortune 1000 firms, the federal government, city governments, hotels, and even in our local hospitals. It is spreading across America like a new religion. And it is moving quickly into the academy. The range of TQM implementation in higher education extends from our most prestigious universities to community colleges.

W. Edwards Deming, an American statistician whose ideas about quality found little favorable response at home, lectured in 1950 to the Japanese. He excoriated them for their cheap, shoddy goods and told them that an emphasis on quality would result in lasting benefits in market share and profitability. He laid out principles for making quality a strategic advantage. They listened to him. They also listened to Joseph Juran in 1954, and later to Philip Crosby.[1] The Japanese struggled with adapting the quality principles, and they pursued the quality ideal relentlessly. The rest, as they say, is history. Hard-pressed American firms began the quality improvement process in the early 1980s. Quality became Job 1 in many companies (e.g., IBM, Ford, Motorola), and the U.S. Navy coined the phrase *total quality management*.

Simply put, libraries are a natural entity for TQM. Is there any library not pursuing improvement in its service? To take this line of thinking a step further, most libraries are pursuing excellence in their products and services. We do not hear library staff saying, "We are committed to mediocrity around here." Libraries are essentially service organizations, and nearly all people working in academic libraries want to offer the very best service to the students and faculty. Users (consumers) describe quality by the characteristics of the product or service they acquire: it is available, it is exactly the information being sought, service is good, and library staff is courteous and helpful. Quality is what one needs and wants, not what you think is needed or what is convenient for you to deliver. To paraphrase Peter Drucker, "Libraries do not exist for people who work in them, but for the people they serve." TQM advocates not only meeting the users' needs but also anticipating and exceeding the ever-changing needs of users. The academic library's users are normally thought of as being primarily the students and faculty. However, the library construct has its own internal users (e.g., the public services' staff are users of the products processed by the technical services' staff).

Ideally, before a library begins rolling out TQM, a strategic plan is in place. The principles of TQM frequently refer back to the library's mission and vision statements, goals, objectives, and strategies. A strategic plan provides focus and articulation to the library's multiyear expectations. The strategies formulated to advance the library must reflect the best thinking available, and they most certainly have to include action steps to be followed by specific library personnel. Like commitment to strategic planning, TQM requires that the library's top management, by word and deed, display commitment to continuous quality improvement. TQM has to be entrenched in the rhetoric of the library's leadership; resources allocation/redeployment is necessary to make "walk the talk" evident.

Most importantly, the quest for quality must be given meaning through actions.[2] Advocates of TQM call for more than a change in management practices. They want an entirely new organization, one whose culture is quality-driven, customer-oriented, marked by teamwork, and avid about improvement.

Since libraries are already user-focused and practice continuous improvement, how is TQM different from what is currently being done? Notable principles of TQM are embodied in the following areas:

- **Managing by fact.** Many library decisions are made without a careful analysis of the facts. Objective data are of prime importance in TQM decision making. Such an approach reduces debate about opinions. Measurement within the context of the library's TQM is feedback for improvement. Accompanying the measurement process is systematic problem solving. Root causes of the problem are identified and a cause-and-effect analysis is done for the specific problem. Checksheets, histograms, and Pareto charts are examples of tools used during the analysis.
- **Eliminating rework.** Much of the work done in academic/research libraries is labor-intensive. The trick is to simplify the work and make certain it is done right the first time. The time spent fixing earlier mistakes is useless and expensive. The rework can equal as much as 20 percent of all operating costs in a library.
- **Respecting people and ideas.** TQM aims at developing teamwork throughout the library. And the library's most valuable resource is its staff. In most library work situations, the people who know what really is needed to improve users' services are those who are working directly with the user. However, many times they are reluctant to bring the problem issues to the attention of their superiors. These staff members should be encouraged to express their ideas on how service can be improved. And if criticism is necessary, their ideas, not the staff members, should be challenged. Staff should be encouraged to point out problems without fearing they will be held responsible. Management by fear cannot be tolerated in a continuous improvement environment.
- **Empowering people.** TQM empowers people by trusting all library staff to act responsibly and giving them proper authority. Generally speaking, library staff want to do the right and better thing. Barriers have to be removed in order for the staff to improve the processes. In Deming's view, 85 percent of all problems are traceable to the process itself, and just 15 percent to the people. He admonishes managers to stop attacking the people and begin attacking the process.[3] Unquestionably, decision making needs to be made at the lowest possible level in a TQM library, and such a library will probably become a flatter organization.

TQM is not an entirely new management technique for libraries. It does, however, offer a more formal, systematic approach to focusing on continuous improvement. The customer/user is TQM's centerpiece. One should not expect TQM to solve all problems nor should it be viewed as a quick fix. Organizations that have failed in their TQM endeavor have tried to implement it too quickly without proper staff training. An effective TQM process is gradually implemented in a library over a two- to three-year period. And it will require a commitment of resources, especially for the intensive training.

Is TQM just another management fad (or, as the Chinese say, a gust of wind)? Based on the recent incline of quality throughout our society, the quality movement is here to stay. And who can argue with the improvement of quality in libraries?

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REFERENCES

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2. Daniel T. Seymour, *On Q: Causing Quality in Higher Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).
3. W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1985).