

# Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 20,1993

## THE QUALITY AUDIT: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents an experiential exercise designed to assist students in understanding and implementing one of the many tools of total quality management. The exercise involves utilizing focus groups to assess the needs and concerns of an organization's customers.

### BACKGROUND

Total quality management is a business philosophy with global appeal (McCormack, 1992). Some say it is the key to competitiveness in the global market. It improves productivity and reduces costs in an organization by increasing the employees' awareness of quality and changing their attitudes. The goal of TQM is for an organization to provide better quality for its customers (Donnelly, 1992).

An integral part of TQM is the quality audit, "a careful study of every factor that affects quality in an activity or a process" (Donnelly, 1992). Here's a step-by-step experiential exercise that can be used in business classes for demonstrating and implementing this TQM tool.

### THE QUALITY AUDIT

Students in business courses typically learn about primary and secondary research methods for gathering information to use in oral presentations, case discussions and written reports. They usually employ secondary research methods for these assignments. However, some professors may assign or encourage such primary techniques as personal interviews or informal surveys. This article describes how the focus group technique, a very popular primary research method used in business and industry, can be introduced to business students when discussing the implementation of a quality audit.

Focus groups are a primary research strategy used for understanding audience attitudes and behavior. Seven to twelve people are interviewed simultaneously, with a moderator leading the respondents, in a relatively free flowing discussion about a specific topic. Even though this technique grew out of the group therapy method used by psychiatrists, it is widely used in business. They are used by corporations, non-profit organizations, and government agencies. The information obtained from focus groups assist decision-makers in these organizations with business planning and policy making.

Why choose focus groups to discuss in your class as a TQM tool research project? Focus groups matured to become the most widely used type of market research in the 1980s (Greenbaum, 1990). In addition, there are some interesting predictions about focus groups for the 1990s. First, focus groups will be used in more unique and innovative ways. Traditionally, information from focus groups was used to help define and refine issues before undertaking a quantitative research project. Now companies are beginning to use focus groups to provide additional insight into the results from quantitative studies, therefore using focus

groups after the fact. Greenbaum (1990) also suggests that human resource personnel will use focus groups to obtain information on "the overall needs, wants, and attitudes of their employees" In this instance, valuable information can be obtained and morale could be increased when the employees see that management wants their input in order to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and overall quality.

### THE ASSIGNMENT

Before assigning the research project, it is useful for the students to discuss focus groups in detail. Types of information to include could be: (1) define what focus groups are and describe how they can be used in a quality audit, (2) discuss the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups compared with other quality audit techniques, and (3) discuss how focus groups are conducted.

This specific experiential exercise involves the students developing a term project using focus groups as the primary means of gathering information. Students interview other students in their department or at the university on a variety of issues relating to their major, their department, course and curriculum issues, or university facilities.

To begin the process, the students obtain a list of possible participants and contact these individuals to set up group interview times and dates. The next step is to prepare a script for the focus group sessions. A script contains the procedures for the group discussion and the questions that will be asked. Each moderator should have a copy of the script. This ensures that each moderator asks the same questions and in the same order to all participants in each group.

A variety of information can be obtained from the students at your college or university by utilizing this exercise. This information could then be summarized and delivered in a report or presentation by members of your class. These reports can also be shared with department chairpersons, college deans, or other university administrators.

### REFERENCES

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