

**INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO POTENTIAL TOTAL QUALITY
MANAGEMENT ETHICAL DILEMMAS**

Walter J. Wheatley, The University of West Florida
Robert H. Bennett, III, University of South Alabama
Terry R. Armstrong, The University of West Florida

ABSTRACT

Much of what students learn in Total Quality Management (TQM) instruction concerning the relationship between the human element of the organization and Total Quality implementation is that TQM is an inherently positive influence. However, because TQM has become such a strong influence on the social information forces, which shape worker attitudes, satisfaction, and future behavior, it is becoming apparent that TQM creates ethical issues because of some of its side effects. Some possible side effects are that TQM may not always improve job satisfaction, effect necessary changes, provide individuals with certainty about their work, and assist them in obtaining personal goals. While the authors of this paper are very positive toward TQM, we feel it is imperative that TQM instruction address the possibility of these side effects.

INTRODUCTION

A basic underpinning in business education, is that organizational or business interventions and strategies are generally ethical. Managers may expect them to be legal, technical, political or practical, but they often ignore the moral content of the thousands of decisions made daily within work environments. This way of thinking assumes that business decisions are primarily moral and only those that pertain to individual actions may be non-moral. However, whenever the question ought or should is raised, the questioner has strayed into an ethical arena even though he or she may attempt to answer the question by how it influences its legality. Here are a few ethical questions asked daily in the work place:

- * Which of the six employees should be promoted?
- * in what should we invest?
- * Should this accounting procedure be changed?

These simple questions make evident that ethical issues permeate the world of work. In fact we have only begun to touch the surface. These questions deal primarily with micro issues, but there is also a growing concern that corporation's act ethically when deciding on intervention strategies such as Total Quality Management (TQM). Some of these meta-ethical questions are even more difficult to answer but must be entertained in the classroom.

Total Quality Management (TQM) must be a total organizational effort involving the human component of the organization in a systematic manner (Walton, 1986). TQM instruction should now recognize the need to involve the necessary human inputs to TQM in their theories and, today, constructs such as empowerment and involvement are extremely important topics in most TQM pedagogy (Ciampa, 1992; Wilkinson, Allen, and S nape, 1991).

Schein (1991) states that humans are the vital determinants of quality improvement and emphasizes the importance of the assumptions, values, and ideologies, which shape the behavior of the TQM organization. TQM has been developed into a way of organizational life, and the essence of the TQM culture is a systematic proclivity toward actively searching out and solving problems which hinder constant improvement (Bertram, 1991).

Emphasis is on total involvement and active participation in management's efforts toward

process advancement. Employees in a TQM organization generally solve problems as empowered teams, who spend a significant amount of time improving the dilemmas, which confront their individual work domain. Decision authority is typically placed at the lowest levels of the organizational hierarchy (Persico. 1991).

Unfortunately, TQM understanding and instruction has been limited to only what practitioners have learned in the field, and few educators have attempted to interpret the unique characteristics of TQM in a theoretical and ethical frame work. TQM possesses some distinct human features, the impact of which are not currently understood. Only recently have researchers begun to look at this sociotechnical system with an eye toward better theoretical understanding and explanation for why and how some of the human dimensions of TQM operate.

For example, many writings make blanket normative statements about how humans should and will behave without providing adequate empirical explanations for the various forces, which might guide such behavior. Oakland (1989) notes that employees take responsibility, are committed, and are generally satisfied with what becomes a "positive work environment." Other writers (Tenner and DeToro, 1992; Persico, 1991) characterize workers as satisfied with their new role, and TQM is generally assumed to bolster overall work satisfaction of most employees.

Although these assumptions are not totally incorrect, they are incomplete and unsubstantiated. Instructors can not afford to simply say that TQM leads to overall satisfaction because it offers a challenge, encourages creativity, and entrusts line workers with decision power. They would be remiss in the classroom to conclude that TQM leads to worker satisfaction simply because it offers several job characteristics which tend to promote critical psychological states.

UTILIZING SOCIAL INFORMATION PROCESSING TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE EFFECTS OF TQM

In few other work settings are the cues from the social environment more compelling. The TQM social environment is powerful for the individual due to the existence of several empowered groups who have been given the relatively straightforward, concise, and important task of searching out and destroying roadblocks to total quality in a particular domain. In general, the social information processing perspective argues that the compelling social context can, through informational social influence processes, affect beliefs about the nature of jobs and work, about what attitudes are appropriate, and, indeed, about what needs people ought to possess. There is evidence that TQM involves an enormous amount of information exchange as well as idiosyncratic cognitive interpretations made by individual employees, working in empowered groups, attempting to make sense of their work environment. This information exchange influences individuals, as adaptive organisms, to shape their attitudes, behavior, and beliefs to their current social context.

On the positive side, the exchange of information inherent to a TQM system leads to simplification and focusing of the work environment and channeling of attention toward a limited number of extremely salient group goals. In turn, the context of work becomes replete with relevant information to the employee. On the negative side, because of the narrow focus on empowerment and simplification processes relative to TQM, workers are left uncertain about a number of personal issues, especially in the whirlwind of change, which accompanies implementation of TQM. Thus, a social information processing approach (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978) may be an excellent pedagogical method for bolstering understanding of this dynamic system and ascertaining possible ethical issues therein.

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Learning, Volume 24, 1997

SOME POSSIBLE ETHICAL SIDE EFFECTS OF TQM

Currently, the combination of a strong focus on a limited domain and a pervasive group influence acts as a powerful channel through which much of a TQM employee's attitudes will be determined. The two work together to form a powerful influence on worker satisfaction. For example, because the activities related to TQM are so central to the work group, the impact of the group is especially strong in that domain.

Because TQM has been heavily stressed time and again, groups formed and empowered for carrying out TQM activities will be especially influential. Because of the pervasiveness of the group in providing information and in imposing norms, worker satisfaction with TQM activities will likely spill over into inferences of satisfaction with other work activities.

Thus, a central proposition can be made that work attitudes and subsequent behavior in a TQM setting will be vastly influenced by social information conveyed by the empowered work group. Individual attitudes, including satisfaction, may be shaped by the informational and normative influences of the team. It is also quite likely that individual worker satisfaction may be unnecessarily high in properly functioning TQM organizations due to the overwhelming pervasive influence of the empowered team concept.

Furthermore, it is proposed, that the TQM system may not allow for optimal analysis and certainty concerning the work environment due to the fact that numerous personal information needs are not attended. Although TQM can bolster satisfaction with one's work setting, it does tend to present diversions and uncertainty which can mitigate one's attempt to optimize personal satisfaction, commitment, and positive contribution.

In short, it is hypothesized that TQM may have some "ethical side effects", which leave individual

employees struggling to make complete sense of many activities in the work environment that need to be shared with our students which are discussed next.

SIDE EFFECT ONE: FALSE SENSE OF WORKER SATISFACTION

In TQM settings, the improvement of quality becomes the central concern, even in the most menial and routine of regular duties (Schein, 1991). As O'Reilly and Caldwell (1979) point out, this compelling environment provides cues, which the individual will combine with prior experience in order to construct and interpret attitudes about certain job aspects. The cuing function directs the energies of subordinates to the goals and behaviors, which are most highly valued by the organization. Individuals use the cues to maximize total satisfaction by allocating their energies across the most important goals. The more equivocal tasks and objectives in the work environment are, the more likely this information will be utilized. In addition, the social context makes certain information or situational aspects salient, thereby influencing perception and interpretation (Taylor and Fiske, 1978).

Festinger (1954) suggested that people cognitively process information relative to personal experiences, using similar others for comparison. The more similar one is and the more available one is for comparison, the more relevant his or her views are for aiding cognitive sensemaking. In the TQM environment, the empowered group is the central source of information and power.

Because there is likely strong agreement as to the nature of work tasks, the worker is likely to use a highly consistent set of social information to make inferences concerning the meaningfulness, importance, and nature of particular job characteristics. Thus, side effect one that should be brought to the student's attention is offered below:

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Learning, Volume 24, 1997

The social information provided by the empowered work group to which the individual belongs will have a powerful influence on TQM-related activities and may form false attitudes about numerous other job characteristics and the general level of job satisfaction.

SIDE EFFECT TWO: NORMATIVE INFLUENCES ON TRUE JOB SATISFACTION

O'Reilly and Caldwell (1985) stress the importance of considering the normative social influences, which accompany, but are distinct from, the informational influences provided by a significant reference group. As Deutsch and Gerard (1955) noted, the normative influences are related to the pressures and sanctions applied by group members to produce conformity in terms of attitudes and behavior.

Groups exert pressure on individuals to conform to shared attitudes. The impact of normative social influence on perceptions and inferences of work attitudes and behavior is potentially of great importance for understanding the social construction of reality (O'Reilly and Caldwell, 1985). In the TQM system, there definitely arises a consensus about what are the important features of the work environment. Over time, the importance of these features is reiterated and strengthened to the point that a common interpretation of social reality emerges. In addition to the impact of informational social influence, groups may develop a normative ethical framework for interpreting and responding to facets of the work environment.

In the empowered, autonomous work groups common to TQM settings, it is most likely that the work group would have formal and informal power to enforce rewards and punishments (Persico, 1991). When a norm is strongly held, it is directly enforced. The existence of the norm and sanctions serves to focus attention on job characteristics in a way consistent with the norm. In addition, attaching group approval/disapproval to attitudes and job behaviors should serve to make them salient to the group member. Thus, side effect two that should be shared with our students is offered below:

The normative influence imposed by the empowered work group to which the individual belongs will have an influence on TQM-related activities but may form false attitudes about numerous other job characteristics and the general level of job satisfaction.

SIDE EFFECT THREE: CHANGE FOR THE SAKE OF CHANGE

It is indeed likely that quality meetings and all of the other fanfare which accompanies TQM produces a tremendous, group-enhanced expectation for change. The emphasis placed on change, involvement, and improvement could simply focus and prime the workers' attention on those aspects of the job (Hackman, Pearce, and Caminis, 1978).

Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) warn that positive attitudes in an organizational change effort, such as TQM, may be due to nothing more than the process of coaptation. They contend that individual workers define their situations using dimensions and criteria constructed by the organization and its managers. TQM is known for its high emphasis on commitment and involvement. Because of the workers' implicit involvement in the process, and the public commitments produced, workers become committed to the outcome. Processes, such as rationalization and justification for prior behaviors, come into play and satisfaction with work may increase regardless of the specific changes made.

In the TQM setting, change becomes the central theme (Savage, 1991). The very suggestion of constant improvement invokes a feeling that things must really need changing. The emphasis on discovering and fixing problems may leave individuals no other choice but to find fault and seek change even when none is necessary. Thus, side

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Learning, Volume 24, 1997

effect three that we present to our students is offered below:

The social information provided by the empowered work group in a TQM environment may influence efforts to change where change is not needed.

SIDE EFFECT FOUR: LITTLE SALIENT INFORMATION YIELDS UNCERTAINTY

It was mentioned earlier that TQM employees extend their attitudes concerning quality improvement/group empowerment to all other aspects of their work environment. If satisfaction with this facet is high, it is likely that general satisfaction will be high. It is naive, however, to believe that employees can receive adequate information concerning non-emphasized aspects of work if the central emphasis and focus is on Total Quality's group processes. The sheer power and volume of this information "washes out" all other sensemaking information. Ashford and Cummings (1983) argue that individuals have a wide variety of goals and propose that individuals need detailed feedback concerning the appropriateness of behaviors related to each of these goals.

Berlyne (1966) proposes that when the appropriate behavior is ambiguous, the individual experiences a noxious state of uncertainty. A tension is created which compels the individual to seek additional information to aid in resolution of the ambiguity. Movement away from certainty results in increased information seeking. People seek this information actively if it is not readily available in the work environment.

The availability of additional information relative to non-TQM work activities is diminished. First, the organization has placed relatively little emphasis on those activities, which do not lead directly to quality improvement. The signals emitted by the leaders of the organization, by the group of empowered workers, and by the overall culture of the organization have had little to do with the tasks unrelated to the central focus. If the worker does not perform these activities as part of

the group, there will be very little salient information available from the reference group concerning these activities. Thus side effect four that should be presented in a TQM class is offered below:

Because the work activities outside the domain of Total Quality efforts have been de-emphasized, the employee is either unable to find clarifying information or does not pay attention to the information which is available due to lack of salience.

SIDE EFFECT FIVE: GROUP EFFECTS ON GOALS

Ashford and Cummings (1983) have argued that personal feedback is a highly valued asset of the individual. Individuals have personal goals that are obtained through work in the organization. The group emphasis will hamper the individual's ability to obtain this personal feedback. The group becomes the subject of most feedback, and group-based feedback is of little value or is of no interest in many cases (Ashford and Cummings, 1983).

Why is personal feedback from superiors important? First, it is the information used to determine how well individual goals are being met. It informs the individual of how effective social behaviors have been in reaching personal goals as well as organizational goals. In pursuing various goals, there is often some uncertainty as to both the appropriateness of any given behavior and how goal directed behaviors are being evaluated by others (Ashford and Cummings, 1983). Feedback has the potential to resolve the uncertainty for the individual by indicating which behaviors are most appropriate for achieving the desired goal.

It is likely that in a TQM setting, the group rather than the individual will be the subject of all goal-clarifying feedback. Thus, the individual may be left to infer personal feedback from the amalgamation of group-oriented feedback, which has been collected. Most employees wish to have direct,

detailed feedback for purposes of clarifying roles, attitudes, goals, and behaviors.

It is true that feedback from the group to the individual will likely have some impact. The informational and normative influences noted earlier will carry some weight, and these individuals will likely be very familiar with the work to be done. The question remains, however, do these individuals hold the necessary information to exert influence outside their empowered domain? Especially in non-TQM activities, the individual may not perceive colleagues as holding the information or authority necessary to guide and redirect their personal efforts toward personal goals. Thus, side effect five that should be presented to students is offered below:

Especially for non-TQM activities, the feedback received as part of the group is not adequate for clarifying the uncertainty inherent to personal efforts toward personal goals.

FUTURE RESEARCH PROPOSALS OF THE EFFECTS OF TQM

Future research in TQM should seek knowledge about the dynamics of TQM and its influence on the behaviors of individuals since it is extremely limited. The social information processing perspective has proven quite applicable for characterizing the complicated dynamics associated with a TQM setting. Answers to more rigorous questions must be obtained. For example, to what extent are attitudes concerning TQM generalized to other aspects of work? Is the emphasis on TQM as powerful in shaping information flows as has been implied? In what conditions do the influences of superiors offset the influence of the empowered group? To what extent is feedback from the TQM group utilized in assessing personal behaviors and personal goals? How cohesive are TQM-related groups? Does the TQM-related focus cause high levels of satisfaction? If so, is the satisfaction caused by TQM-related activities high enough to offset any uncertainty caused by TQM's tendency to divert important information?

These are all-important questions and each illustrates the fact that this field is very young and "uncharted." TQM is not a passing fad. It is not simply a product of the "pop" press, but is instead a strong, capable management system which deserves more rigorous study and assessment in order to properly prepare our students for their future careers.

CONCLUSION

A number of questions regarding some of the basic assumptions made about the nature of TQM and its impact on the behavior of individuals as we currently teach it have been raised. It has been proposed that the combination of empowered teams and a quality focus provides impetus for a whole host of social dynamics which have massive positive influence on attitudes, including work satisfaction, employee certainty, and group and individual behaviors. However, blanket assumptions that TQM always improves job satisfaction, effects necessary changes, provides individuals with certainty about their work, and assists them in obtaining personal goals cannot be made without further research on the possible diversions of personally-relevant information and that TQM raises many normative and ethical issues which cannot be passed over lightly and must be discussed in the classroom.

REFERENCES

References available upon request.