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EDUCATING FOR QUALITY IN THE WOOD INDUSTRY: SOME WORDS OF CAUTION

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Abstract: *The problem of over enthusiastically adopting paradigms and models is well known in science in general, and in management in particular. The current trend of presenting "quality" in an unfailingly positive light in manufacturing, including in the wood industry, echoes this problem. This results in those aspects of "quality enhancement" that reflect negative processes and emotions being neglected, receiving lip service attention, or in subtle ways being denigrated. This is, potentially, the source of a severe limitation in the understanding and implementation of quality enhancement programs in the wood industry. Good intentions are insufficient. We cannot continue to neglect such issues as: authority and control; caution and reserve; autonomy and separateness; competition and aggressiveness; dislike and resistance; exploitation and manipulation; and self-interest, if we wish education for quality to be successful.*

Keywords: *education, quality in the wood industry, wood working*

1. Introduction

A good deal of current theory and practice in education for quality in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular, derives from what might be termed optimistic human relations' assumptions. Many of those advocating quality tend in their work frequently to hold powerful though unexpressed values that affect their "programs" as well as themselves. If I give only one example from the management literature, Seetharaman *et al.* (2006), conclude that "if TQM is implemented properly, it can be a very powerful vehicle by which the organization can achieve excellence in business performance. As such, (the) TQM framework and its key principles should not be answerable for its failure. Majority of (the failure) was due to the insufficient understanding of what TQM means for each of the unique organizations and how to implement it effectively."

In this paper I would like to examine some of these underlying values and to point out that they are primarily derived from a certain set of biases in favor of "positive" emotions and attributes. As a result, some other aspects of human interaction and organizational life that involve "negative" emotions and attributes have been neglected, given only lip service attention, or are in subtle ways denigrated. These "negative" aspects and their outcomes, I term the dark side of quality programs. The concept of a dark side to quality programs is similar to the concept of the shadow as used in the psychology of C.G. Jung. In Jungian psychology, the shadow characterizes those

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aspects of an individual personality that one has not accepted and integrated into one's consciousness and self-image. The shadow thus contains characteristics that often appear negative, alien, and threatening to the individual and they are frequently rejected. Nonetheless, in denying and disowning them one denies and disowns part of oneself. Since the struggle to repress the shadow can never be completely successful, one is also troubled by and at a loss as to how to cope with its intermittent appearance in daily life and behavior. The failure to openly address the dark aspects of education for quality in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular, I believe has been, and is, the source of a severe limitation in the understanding and implementation of such programs.

In this paper I will explore the dark side of quality programs in the sections entitled "The True Nature of Organizations" and "Dark Side Issues." In the former section I outline what I mean by "negative" emotions, attributes and values and propose four basic assumptions about what organizational life is really like. In the latter section, we turn to issues specific to education and programs for quality in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular, and how “dark side” aspects appear in quality implementation efforts. Finally, we conclude with a caution that awareness of the complexity of the spectrum of human and organizational values, emotions and behaviors is still no guarantee of full understanding or of successful education and program implementation for quality in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular.

2. The true nature of organizations

Any student of current literature on quality education and programs and their implementation in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular, will be aware of the unfailingly positive nature of the processes and emotions that are presented. The cause would seem to lie in the different backgrounds and assumptions of those who initially developed quality thinking and those involved in its on-going implementation. The former group is almost exclusively composed of statisticians and engineers (Deming, 1986; Deming, 1982; Feigenbaum, 1983; Ernst and Young, 1990; etc.) while the latter is more heavily represented by human relations and organization development specialists. The former see organizations as rational, logical and structured, while the latter see organizations as directed by values, emotions, personal preferences and political manipulations. In general, the values of the "rationalists" currently prevalent in quality thinking include:

- logic and rationality
- trust of, and openness toward, others
- collaboration and participation
- affection and responsiveness
- group interest

While these values certainly seem appropriate and important in the development of effective quality organizations, I believe that the literature on quality efforts in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular, has neglected values at the other end of the spectrum of human interaction.

For example:

- authority and control
- caution and reserve
- autonomy and separateness
- competition and aggressiveness
- dislike and resistance
- self-interest

I would argue that in order to genuinely understand the nature of organizational life and the processes involved in implementing quality, practitioners need to recognize the complexity described above and deal with the “negative" elements of human interaction in organizations. To facilitate this process, I propose the following four basic assumptions:

Assumption One: ***Rational structuring of an organization is a myth***

The reality of an organization is in existing pockets of information, pockets of influence, and pockets of sabotage. Any observer of organizations is astounded to find that the members of an organization keep on developing and evolving new processes for managing information, power, and deviance. The process of managing this changing and shifting subculture activity is a primary characteristic of organizational life. In large organizations, the membership realignments in power and information groups are very rapid. Promotions, new course developments, new markets, competition with other systems, national policies, etc. require a continuous realignment and reassignment among strategic and key persons in an organization, and these subgroups form around personal style, persona1 choices, personal values, and personal preferences of those who assume temporary leadership of these subgroups. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that quality efforts that largely ignore this organizational reality all too often result in superficial change at best.

Assumption Two: ***Publicly announced decision rules are not followed in practice during decision-making***

Rule-making processes follow observable patterns.

Observations indicate that, (a) most major decisions are irreversible and those who make these decisions will defend them stubbornly; (b) most major decisions are based on optimum incomplete information - as the amount of available information increases, the amount of decision-making discretion decreases; and (c) the influence structure in an organization is a function of individuals' abilities to grab (or fill) the influence vacuum regardless of organizational hierarchy.

The implications of these observed rules in decision-making are two-fold: (a) that individual members low in the organizational hierarchy learn risk-taking skills and discretion; and (b) that individual members need to develop a modicum of trust with other members in the organization to minimize conflict within decision-making under conditions of incomplete information. Once again, quality efforts as they move away from technical areas where optimum complete information exists, run into enormous difficulties trying to cope with the actual processes of decision-making in so-called "soft" areas of organizational life.

Assumption Three: ***The process of learning assumes freedom for regressive behavior and for experimentation with non-adult behavior in adult situations***

The assumption that adults always behave as adults in the organizational situation is questionable. The question, therefore, is not to demand adult behavior; rather, it is to create climates in which learning and interactions with each other are non-threatening. Adults sulk, show apathy, engage in temper tantrums, and show childlike spontaneity. An organization needs to create a non-threatening culture in which such childlike responses are not punished, but channeled into innovative directions. The implementation of quality programs often results not in mature, inspirational and uplifting behaviors but in exactly the opposite. Behavior that is childish, vindictive, demoralizing and, in general, disappointing.

Assumption Four: ***The development of trust and openness requires the management of both problems of disagreement and agreement***

Contrary to much organizational theory, actual organizational life demonstrates that achieving agreement and consensus does not necessarily result in the development of trust and openness. Often the exact opposite is the result. The reason is that there are two kinds of conflict, real and deceptive:

a) Real conflict, involves real, substantive differences. Differences that can be empirically addressed,

resolved on the basis of data or experience, and that are issue rather than personality driven.

b) Deceptive conflict consists of the hostile, negative blaming behavior that occurs when agreement is mismanaged. This kind of conflict is a defensive measure after agreement has resulted not in the expected success but in failure. Rather than accepting shared responsib1lity for the negative outcome of this particular agreement in an atmosphere of trust and openness, the tendency is to become frustrated, angry, irritated and dissatisfied, blaming one another and the organization as a whole.

3. Dark Side Issues

Having described the dark side of organizational life in general, the time has come to consider specific “dark side” issues of quality education and programs in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular. As we shall see, we can take any number of quality values and principles and find a dark side to them. For the purposes of this paper, we will consider six such examples:

1) Forced continuous improvement: Its effect on self-image

One of the cardinal principles of quality thinking is continuous improvement. The never ending race, as it has been called, or the race without a finishing line. The principle may make sense for organizations, but what are we to make of it at an individual level? Is it realistic to expect that individuals will never reach a ceiling to their achievement? I would argue that not everyone can continuously improve. In fact, most people reach what is, for them, an optimal level of functioning and are content to remain that way. Furthermore, those people who do strive for continuous improvement inevitably find that the increments of change become smaller and smaller. The result, for those who are content and for those finding improvement increasingly more difficult, is inevitable disillusionment. When we add to this an environment that demands or "forces" continuous improvement, individuals who are unable to "deliver" view themselves as failures. Their self-esteem is affected and their self-image becomes increasingly negative.

2) Pseudo-empowerment

The quality literature describes the bedrock of quality as stemming from autonomy and empowerment. These efforts range from improvement initiatives to self-managed teams. Underlying their ability to succeed is the organizational decision to empower lower level workers to take over in whole, or in part, problem-solving and decision-making processes. Unfortunately, there are many examples of management relinquishing power all too reluctantly or not at all. This we term "pseudo-empowerment". It is those situations where workers are led to believe that they have power or have decision-making authority, only to find that when it comes to the crunch they do not have any power.

A good example of this is when work teams are told that they are not simply improvement teams but self-managed teams and then are severely restricted to dealing with technical issues only. The tough issues of team membership, salary, employee appraisals, promotion and career development are all outside the limits of their authority. The outcome is almost always anger, frustration, and disillusionment.

3) Continuous competition heading to inevitable win/lose work environments

Employees who are required by their organizations to demonstrate continuous

improvements often find themselves drawn into an environment of continuous competition. I demonstrate achievement by outperforming others. They in turn are drawn into the vicious cycle of attempting to outdo me to demonstrate their achievement in the following round of assessments. At the macro level this inevitably creates a work environment where the dominant value and prevailing feelings are of being locked in a win/lose or zero sum setting. This is hardly the spirit of quality improvement but rather of quality improvement out of control. The kind of quality program that is good for management but not for the line workers. The usual result is a decline in motivation, morale and ultimately productivity because either valued employees leave the company to escape this organizational culture or the employees learn how to "work" the system in a variation of the well-known convicts and wardens dynamic.

4) Empowerment without preparation, O.J.T. or support.

In an earlier example we analyzed pseudo-empowerment. An equally problematic issue is empowerment without the necessary training, tools and means. It is the equivalent of throwing someone who has never had swimming lessons into the deep-end of the pool and waiting to see if they sink or swim. Particularly in the case of more complex teams such as self-managed teams, the need to prepare them, train them, provide on-going coaching and support until they achieve performance maturity, is enormous. The necessary training is not only in quality tools and techniques, as is so often the case. Genuine empowerment is accompanied by powerful group dynamic processes. It is these processes that all too often overwhelm the team and cause dysfunction. Knowledge of SPC, for example, is hardly of help in coping with difficult, often painful group dynamic processes.

5) Commitment without limits.

The decision to enter into quality programs carries with it a call for commitment.

Commitment to specific values, commitment to the organization and its goals, commitment to work demands. The question arises, is there a limit to this commitment? If benchmarking shows that the "competition" is only paying minimum wages, is that a commitment that should be demanded of our employees? Should commitment to the institution come at the price of commitment to one's family? There is no easy resolution to these dilemmas. What is clear is the potential for exploitation. In one case that I encountered, employees were "expected" to come in to work at the start of the Gulf War. Those who for family or other reasons did not come to work, even for a day, were considered "traitors". This, ironically, at a company that prides itself on its HR policies.

6) Retrenchment and Quality Programs.

The quality logic argues that a successful quality organization is a flatter, leaner organization. Flatter and leaner means fewer employees. Do quality efforts mean fewer jobs? No, goes the quality argument because success results in greater market share increased "sales", organizational growth. Staff don't lose their jobs, they simply need to be flexible and open to reallocation. You may not remain in job A, you can be reassigned to job B where there is more demand. Does this argument hold true? The answer is, not necessarily. Firstly it ignores all those employees who cannot be sufficiently flexible, or would simply like to specialize and develop expertise in one area. Secondly, it ignores macro-

economics. When the economy is in recession organizational growth is impossible. Flatter and leaner really does mean fewer jobs. The problem for quality programs during economic recessions then is two-fold. The first is whether to reveal to employees at the outset that initiating quality programs will result in job loss, almost a certainty for creating motivational problems. The second is when organizations do not tell employees and they work it out for themselves. In my experience, those who work it out for themselves are usually the best and the brightest. They immediately take defensive measures which often means either sabotaging the program or leaving for another company at their time and choosing, rather than when the initial company would have wanted them to leave.

3. Conclusion

Because of the crucial significance I ascribe to the dark side of quality programs, I wish to conclude this paper by recommending avoidance of all naiveté about recommendations and prescriptions for how to act when dealing with this aspect of education and programs for quality in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular,. Such caution would be necessary regardless of the particular values underlying and justifying particular actions. We all nod wisely when someone says that there is usually a discrepancy between what people say and what they do. Similarly, it is a cliché to say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. But in labeling it as a cliché, we tend to overlook that we are providing a description and not an explanation. That good intentions (such as those subsumed in the phrase "Total Quality Management") so often produce contrary effects needs explanation, not documentation. Clichés, like statistical correlations, describe relationships, not cause and effect dynamics.

Furthermore, agreement on values is easier to reach than agreement about the appropriateness of value-derived actions. This alone should caution one against the tendency, tempting and understandable, to assume that because quality programs incorporate a set of values which should inform action, it is a set of values that ensures certain desired outcomes. The failure to resist this tempting oversimplification leads only to undesired outcomes and disillusionment.

Education for quality in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular, is a high-sounding phrase, an inspirational slogan. To be against it is to appear to be for sin and against virtue. The eagerness with which we accept it as an unalloyed "good" testifies more to the strength of our need for solutions to the problems plaguing our economies, organizational life and management achievements than to our understanding of the realities and complexity of achieving successful, stable, long-term organizational change and success. There is no formula for how to implement and maintain quality. Indeed, the point of this paper is that before we indulge our tendency to develop formulas and techniques (to become over absorbed with technical-engineering issues) or to turn to commercially packaged quality "solutions" in our endeavors to effect successful change, we need to understand better how the nature of people and of everyday organizational life produce the situations we wish to change and create undesired outcomes despite our best intentions. We can learn a lot not only from success but from failure if we are able to see how we and the nature of our organizational life contribute to our success and failure in manufacturing in general and the wood industry in particular.

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