

CUSTOMER-FOCUSED ENVIRONMENT

ORGANIZATIONS MUST EXTEND THEIR DEFINITION OF CUSTOMERS.



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I learned a long time ago that quality standards, issues and performance are goals people can rally around, unlike other goals like cost reduction or productivity improvement. Quality opens people up to change because the change is for a good reason. It connects them with the customer and taps the motive of pride in their work

This should not be a surprise to most of our readers but to create a true quality environment an organization must first focus on the customer. The purpose of all work and all improvement effort is to better serve the customer.

This should be recognized by everyone as fundamental to survival, but unfortunately some managers do not always do well with this concept, straightforward as it might seem. It is important, therefore, that managers ensure that there is a common definition of the basic words and phrases used in communicating what they hope to accomplish and why.

Quality means satisfying customers' needs and expectations. It is this focus that is, in fact, the purpose of all work. However, it seems not everyone has the same understanding of the word quality, which results in mixed messages.

If the focus of a quality environment is to satisfy the needs and expectations of the customer, then the basic premise of all other organizational needs will be addressed: profitability, producing quality products and services, improving productivity, out-performing the competition, managing change, and ensuring employee involvement.

Another critical definition is required. Just as some people are apt to translate quality too narrowly, so too may we consider customers in the same restrictive sense. One of the single most powerful revelations in my quality education has been that customers are not only external but internal as well.

When our thoughts are extended to other departments and fellow employees as customers, significant positive changes occur in the way work is done or, in quality terms, in the way we deliver our outputs, products or services.

It is important to emphasize that satisfying the needs of the external customers must be paramount. As we strive to better meet the needs of internal customers, we must guard against diminishing external customer satisfaction. The challenge is to see our efforts as a total system designed to satisfy our traditional customers.

The pursuit, the focus, is toward but one end, which is to meet or exceed customer expectations. It is this oneness of purpose that links all activities toward a single end that makes the total quality environment.

The focus on internal customers and satisfying their needs toward improving external customer satisfaction has the potential to transform the organization from one of departmental boundaries and barriers into one of complementing rather than competing activities.

In this new environment information ceases to be hoarded as a power cache and is shared not only within the department but with others as well. Collaboration is common, competition is not; partnerships are sought, teamwork prevails; and continual improvement of the system is the goal.

The customer focus when supported by this single-system attitude requires a new generation of management that is long past due for some organizations. The traditional hierarchical organization restricts not only management but all within it.

The organization that is capable of multi-department, cross-functional teamwork on a daily basis is one where processes are seen as related parts of the total quality system. People working in such an environment better understand not only the organization's mission, but their own role toward its accomplishment. Consequently, people are better able to fulfill their tasks and to improve on them.

Essentially, what is being described is the culture of an organization. More than any other responsibility of management, the culture it creates, supports, or maintains is critical to the ability of the organization to provide the desired products and services.

Too often, however, management gives little thought to the cultural tasks required to create and maintain the environment. Typically, when management's attention is on aspects of the work environment, it is in response to conditions occurring because of management negligence. The recognition of internal customers, however, helps management address how best to satisfy the needs of direct reports, work associates, and other departments.

A true quality environment is driven by a focus on the customer. This purpose provides our organization direction as well as purpose.

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