

The Magic Constant

By David Finney

Quality can be a tender and fragile thing for it relies on the commitment of its people, and people by their nature are changeable and subject to cultural and economic influence. Quality is also vulnerable at certain times: when people are busy for instance or are working in fear of redundancy. If morale or confidence goes down so might quality and then everyone suffers in a circle so vicious that if not broken a company may suffer irreparable damage as tainted corporate reputation spreads like a virus.

But here's the thing: quality although a serious business needs to have a playful element for attempting to engage organisations with its seriousness is not easy. Quality should be and often is an instinctive process. Some have the mindset of 'I don't like procedures' and yet each of us carries round with them a set of internal procedures that ensure we lead a good quality of life. Whether it's rinsing a plate before it goes in the dishwasher or checking the message in a birthday card before sealing the envelope. Procedures and routines are a way of life and a healthy one at that.

A meaningful conversation about quality

So in order to have a meaningful conversation about quality with staff in an organisation, it can be helpful to hook attention with anecdotes and imagery as well as engaging the intellect with logic about the consequences of not following procedure. No one wants a blocked dishwasher or an unhappy friend any more than they do a report littered with mistakes and an unhappy client. It does not make any difference as to the type of organisation in question; retail outlets will think about its customers, schools will think about its pupils, hospitals about its patients; it's all client service.

So how do organisations manage quality? Adhering to a Quality Standard is certainly one way – be it ISO standard or the more recently introduced Customer Service Excellence – successor to Chartermark. Others use a traffic light system where Red is Non-compliant/Immediate action required; Amber is Non compliant/Improvements required and Green is compliant; others take an 'improvement journey' with training consultants or independent assessment bodies.

For a sceptical staff not partial to audits, how can we turn them from 'we really don't need you to come in here, we have everything just the way we want it to be' into "we are great, but please find something wrong and make us even better!". And what of those departments who – when something has to suffer in the Quality Triangle, will sacrifice quality rather than negotiate cost or timings?

Quality then must be shrink-wrapped; laminated and on display every minute of every day – not just as a certificate in the reception area but as identifiable and protected office behaviour. When there is uncertainty there must be one constant - The Magic Constant of Quality.

Pathways to Excellence

In a Magic Constant of 15 for instance (sometimes known as a Magic Square), all rows and all columns must add to that number. So whatever happens, the total must always be 15. Equally in a company, whatever occurs, quality must be the one true constant. Everything depends on it. There are many pathways to excellence of course and by the virtue of poetic coincidence here are 15 ways to raise the profile of quality in an organisation:

1. Engagement

Tell them a story, paint a picture or invite them to a workshop and share a box of Quality Street.

2. Enquiry

Ask good questions – standard ones such as "when you are not in the office how can your neighbour find your files?" - And more incisive ones like "what is the one thing you can do tomorrow to improve quality in your department?"

3. Involve

Don't just 'tell'; really make people feel a part of the quality system and reward them with changes when they make sensible suggestions.

4. Coach

Empower quality representatives to take on initiatives and coach them through the change process.

5. Re-launch

Imagine a quality standard is being established for the first time and sell its benefits, keep it fresh.

6. Fear factor

Scare teams with stories of other organisations who have lost a quality standard and liken it to a forest fire.

7. Link

Link the quality system to other areas of stature and kudos – e.g. Data Protection, Copyright Laws.

8. Continual improvement

Create a culture continual improvement by setting up quality forums. Quote Antony Robbins, Steven Covey and Japanese Quality Circles as appropriate.

9. PR

The value of good PR is golden – i.e. 'we are a talented organisation so let's not dilute what we do by losing our quality disciplines'. The quality department must of course walk around as ambassadors of quality and must walk the talk. Sending round audit reports with typos is not conducive. Publicising great initiatives is priceless.

10. Concepts

Provide intellectually stimulating concepts of what quality means; show models or relate it to human things that mean something to people.

11. Advocates

Ambassadors, Champions, Quality Reps call them what you will but have them; 1 or 2 in each department; people who understand it, buy into it and are great initiators and communicators.

12. Back to basics

Keep it simple – the message, the systems, everything.

13. M.A.P

Measure Act Publish; ensure measurements are in place; produce action plans based on those measurements; publish the data across the company, both the good and the bad.

14. All inclusive

Everything is quality – everyone is responsible.

15. Marketing

Get the marketing team to support quality and market cleverly with campaigns, posters, 'quality week' adverts, whatever it takes; treat staff as if they were prospects who needed attracting and convincing.

Whatever happens and whatever changes are in progress, Quality must be the Magic Constant.

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