

Reflective Quality: A Process Approach

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Like time, quality marches on. That means no matter how long it took your company to achieve certain "quality" standards, you must now do more than simply maintain them. It is essential for long term success that you adapt your company's quality standards to the constantly changing needs and desires of your customers.

When quality first became a hot issue back in the mid-'80s, companies strived to reach particular product quality standards. These standards were most often driven by an internal perspective of what the quality of the product should be, and sometimes, to a lesser extent, by an industry-driven perspective. Later, companies began to realize that quality should also be applied to service. Agile, service quality standards were established based on management or internal ideas of what they should be.

By the mid-'90s, we were all well on our way to combining these quality processes and gave birth to the concept of "Total Quality Management."

You might ask: What could be better than Total Quality Management?

How about Total Quality Management from your customer's perspective? Reflective Quality!

In other words, provide whatever the customer wants.

Picture this: Your company's product manufacturing and service processes are so refined, that any special request made by a customer can be met without throwing your business into chaos. No production time is lost. No one puts in countless overtime hours. No special management meetings are necessary to secure "special circumstance" approvals.

Perhaps it would help to think of each of your business processes as "Lego" blocks. Each block can be separated, rearranged and snapped back together in different (but equally functional) process configurations.

This is the true test of Total Quality Management. And, it is what today's customers have come to expect.

For any company to reach this completely flexible, reflective level of quality, it first must pass through three stages:

Before anything, you must move into a phase of process thinking. This requires formal recognition by the company's management that they do, indeed, believe that process equals results. But more than just a cognitive step, process thinking requires that you begin to re-evaluate your processes and make the changes necessary to improve your product/service offering.

Next, you begin to set goals to simplify processes. Once you've re-evaluated your processes and taken steps to make the best product/service offering possible, you must continue to look carefully and make sure that all your processes are necessary - especially in the administrative and service areas. Take credit checks, for example. I know of several companies that are doing away with credit checks because they found that doing the checks was more costly than the average loss from bad credit. Some other key areas to check: duplicate files, unnecessary files, rework loops, inspections, unnecessary copies, etc... Your ultimate goal: eliminating waste and streamline the remaining cost added!

Now, you're ready to move into the third stage, called process re-design. If you've uncovered some gray areas in the previous step, you must now ask some tough questions: Why do we do this? Must we continue to do this? Can the business thrive if we don't do it? When you come across one of these gray areas, eliminate it! Take a clean sheet of paper and start over again. Most of the time, these are functions that either can be eliminated or combined with another functions. Don't be afraid of this step. Sure, eliminate it! Sounds pretty drastic, but it isn't. You can always re-evaluate the process later and add back any steps you took out if they are essential. I just caution you to make sure that you fully resolve any questions you have about your processes. Constantly "tinkering" with them will hold you back. It is not the way to achieve a reflective total quality system.

Now ask yourself. "Is our product/service offering of the highest quality? Are our administration and customer service procedures tightly structured and necessary?" If you can answer "yes" to these questions ... congratulations!

You've arrived at the very special level I call "Reflective Total Quality Management." At this point, your processes should be so exact, simplified and interchangeable that your operations will reflect back to the customers exactly what they want to see. In essence, you can adapt your business operations to provide the quality your customer wants, from his point of view, every time.

Now, your company's business processes are interchangeable building blocks - or "Lego blocks" -that can be reordered in a moment's notice to meet every customer's unique need or situation. Your company will be so well organized and well-run, in fact, that it won't appear to any customer that his was a "special request." It's just how you do business! From this point forward, that is how a successful businesses, a Reflective Total Quality Management business operates.