

How “Human” really Quality is? Rhetoric and Reality

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ABSTRACT

The new ISO 9000:2015 and the Business Excellence movement mainly through the American and European Quality Awards are the prevailing approaches to quality improvement according to the majority of Quality academics. Both seemed to provide a basis for the implementation of a TQM philosophy, which provides a unique way of improving organizational performance and attaining competitive advantage. The TQM rhetoric calls for a cultural shift, emphasizes self-control, autonomy and have a significant effect in the way people are managed. In the context of these awards and the new ISO 9000:2015, new realities and perspectives emerge for the effective utilization of the organization's human resources. In the literature, aligning Quality Improvement programs and initiatives with human resources effective utilization requires radical changes in the way the organizations perceive their “human capital” and the way the organizations' HR function operate. However, in reality the importance of the “human or people element” in the quality improvement efforts are often been overlooked and organizations worldwide are often engaged in a “process oriented” perspective of Quality Improvement. Until recently, academics and practitioners seemed to be preoccupied with the study and implementation of the “hard” elements of quality improvement (mainly ISO 9000 certification), and the evidence is on the few books and articles published in the past two decades. Only recently a number of authors suggested that the shift on thinking about quality has major implications for the management of people and has occurred in parallel to a shift in thinking about Strategic Human Resources Management and the involvement of the HR department in quality improvement efforts. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which HR and Quality are compatible and investigate the context of Rhetoric and Reality in this relationship.

Keywords: Quality Improvement, ISO 9001, Business Award, Human, Rhetoric, Reality

1. Introduction

The word quality in recent year is becoming very popular among organizations and academics and it is widely used in annual reports, in advertisement and even in government initiatives all over the world. However, although the true meaning and the value of quality is gaining ground in all over the world, the figures said a different story. Organizations are facing enormous quality problems in production (defects, scrap), in marketing (customer satisfaction), in logistics (response time, reliability), in finance (quality costs) and in most of their functions, even though the “Quality Revolution” has started according to many authors long time ago.

Having that in mind it is obvious that there is an oxymoron in the quality literature. Some authors argue that quality is about rhetoric and good stories in order for organizations to promote sales and create a “customer-orientation” profile. In United States and in Europe awards were established to promote awareness and provide a basis and a model for TQM implementation. However, the organizations both in US and in Europe were not so enthusiastic about the awards and the numbers are very small in all categories. On the other hand the certification with the ISO 9000 series of standards is gaining ground and especially in Asia the increase in certified organizations is beyond expectations. But still, many authors state that ISO 9001 is not equal to Total Quality Management but is just a third part quality audit that is not related to final product quality mainly used by organizations as a commercial tool. So what is “right path” to quality improvement and to customer satisfaction? Why quality is so desirable but very few organizations are willing to be involved in the quality journey?

In the quality literature the importance of the “human or people element” in the quality improvement efforts are often been overlooked and according to Wilkinson, et.al (1991) organizations are often engaged in a “production-oriented” perspective of Total Quality. Until recently, academics and practitioners seemed to

be preoccupied with the study and implementation of the “hard” elements of quality improvement (mainly ISO 9000 certification), and the evidence is on the few books and articles published in the 90’s and the following years. Only recently a number of authors suggested that the shift on thinking about quality has major implications for the management of labor and has occurred in parallel to a shift in thinking about Strategic Human Resources Management (Hart&Schlesinger, 1991; Blackburn&Rosen, 1993 Beaumont, et.al, 1994; Baruch, 1997; Vouzas, 2004; Conti, 2002; Soltani, 2003; Soltani, et.al, 1994). It has been argued that TQM cannot be applied in isolation. TQM is a total philosophy involving all organizational members and has a high personnel content.

2. The ISO 9001 and Business Excellence (Quality Awards)

Since the introduction of ISO 9000 fifteen years ago there were a series of controversies and doubts over the role and the significance of ISO 9000 series on improving product and service quality, achieving internal and external customer satisfaction, and improving performance. According to Beckford (2002), is “an attempt to harmonize all the standards and remove the manufacturing bias. Several authors stated that the ISO 9001 is directed towards performance rather than conformance (Najmi&Kehoe, 2000). Coleman&Douglas (2003) argue that organizations in order to achieve the new ISO 9001 should demonstrate that have quality processes and procedures in place, but they are skeptical about what happens after ISO 9001 certification. Casadesús & Karapetrovic (2005) studying the relationship between the “new” and the “old” ISO found that “the evaluation of the new ISO 9001: 2000 standard is generally positive”. Vouzas & Gotzamani (2005) argue that there is no really negative impact but mention that the perceived benefits are less than the previous standard and that the level of reported benefits of ISO 9001/2/3: 1994 decreases with time, evidenced by two empirical studies conducted in 1998 and 2002. Overall argue that there is “an erosion of the perceived usefulness of ISO 9001 in the future, especially in terms of short-term benefits”. Martínez-Lorente & Martínez-Costa (2004) further argue that organizations certified by ISO 9000 “may have gone a part of the way to TQM. However, the authors claim that it is only the “first part of the way, not its end, because there is a large amount of TQM requirements that ISO 9001 does not satisfy”. Research on ISO 9001 all over the world is still going on and the perceived benefits and its integration to other quality initiatives is expected to clear the picture and provide a basis for further improvement of the standard (Laszo, 2000; McAdam& Jackson, 2002; Najmi & Kehoe2000.).

According to Vouzas & Gotzamani (2005), “careful analysis of the ISO 9000:1994 standards’ requirements compared to the basic principles of TQM and the requirements of the two most representative business excellence awards, the European Quality Award and the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, reveals several main shortages of the ISO 9000:1994 standards. The authors stated that lack of strategic quality planning, absence of top management commitment; lack of focus on customer satisfaction, lack of systematic training in quality. Furthermore HR competitiveness, benchmarking, and quality cost measurement are absent, as well as issues related to health, safety and the environment in a study in Greek EQA awarded organizations. However, many authors believe that the the revised ISO 9001 series of standards is a significant improvement on the previous version in terms of its conceptual simplification, its process-based vision and its acknowledgement of the importance of customer satisfaction as a key requirement for verifying the effectiveness of the quality system (Conti, 1999). The basic principles on which the new standards’ requirements are based are much more TQM oriented.

On the other hand, Business Excellence literature is mostly based on rhetoric and “good stories” on EQA and MBNQA awarded organizations in Europe and USA. Bohoris (1995) in a comparative analysis of the two main awards stated that “Quality Awards’ assessment procedures seem to be the only comprehensive means available to date by which TQM initiatives can be thoroughly monitored and assessed, providing any business with a competitive internal mechanism necessary to face the imposition of future new barriers to trade in the form of technical or quality standards requirements. However, the criticism over “excellence models and awards” is growing (Dale, et.al, 2000; Laszlo, 1996; van der Wiele, et, al, 2000; McDonald, et.al, 2002; Hewitt, 1997; Steventon, 1994) According to Dale,et.al (2000) the EQA “acted in response to the perceived tarnished image of TQM, whilst the consultancies sought to address the diminishing demand and increasing competition for their services”.

3. Quality Improvement and “Human Resources” - A literature review

3.1 ISO 9000 series implementation and Human Resources

The literature on Human Resources utilization and quality improvement efforts is rather limited, especially when the focus is on the relationship and the impact of the implementation of the ISO 9000 series. The majority of these studies are descriptive in nature, with many generalizations, and basically put the basis for a better understanding of the role of the personnel function in quality improvement efforts. TQM is often confused with quality initiatives, short-term projects and ISO 9000 series certification (Soltani, et al, 2003; Hill & Wilkinson, 1995; Ho, 1994). The launch and implementation of the ISO 9000 series of standards increases even more the companies' expectations and the likelihood that the new systems will bring firms one step closer to TQM and Business Excellence Vouzas & Gotzamani (2005). The introduction of the five building blocks and the introduction of the process-based approach are an attempt by ISO to reduce the amount of documentation required. Even more, the new elements that it introduces to the certified companies belong to the “soft elements” of TQM, that have been proved to be the fundamental ones in the TQM system, with a very strong effect in improving company results (Costa & Martinez-Lorente, 2003). However, up to now there is no major research done on the effects and impact of the ISO 9000 series of standards in Strategic HRM. The relationship between SHRM and ISO 9000 series certification is often seen as part of the HR function involvement in the design, introduction and implementation of a quality assurance system certified by an external evaluator. Wilkinson, et, al (1991) and the IPM (1993) study suggest that HR function actually plays an important role in the design and implementation phase of a quality assurance system. On the other hand, there are cases in which a quality assurance system had been implemented within the HR department.

Research evidence shows that when quality management evolves from quality control or quality assurance, it tends to focus on the “process” (technical) aspects of quality rather than on the “human” aspects (IPM, 1993; Kufidu & Vouzas, 1998). Thus, organizations being engaged in a quality assurance approach to quality improvement, do not usually allow sufficient room for staff contributions, and training is targeting only towards people involved in the production process. The personnel department usually is a peripheral function with a very traditional role. The IPM study shows that organizations placing emphasis on a “process” approach to quality tend to exclude human resource department from the design and implementation of quality assurance system such as ISO 9000 series. In most of the cases its role is limited and oriented towards increasing the awareness of the quality standard and handling the administrative aspects of quality efforts (IPM, 1993). Human Resources professionals seem to participate in the various phases of quality initiatives and play a vital role (usually a facilitator role) in these efforts. Overall, the involvement of HR function in quality improvement efforts usually is materialized in three ways a) by participating in the design, introduction and maintenance of various quality initiatives b) by changing traditional personnel practices in order to support a total quality culture and c) by establishing a quality orientation within the function itself. However, we have to consider that the quality stage or level an organization is, instantly influences the embodied organizational changes, which in turn affect the way human resources considerations are formed in relation to strategic quality goals.

3.2 The Excellence Movement and the “Human Resources” element

Hendick&Triplett (1989), suggest that implementing Total Quality initiatives requires continuous adjustments of every facet of work environment and corporate culture and the effective utilizations of organization's human resources through the HR department can play an important role in TQM assessment, planning and implementing process as well as in annual monitoring and review. Furthermore, improving quality, meeting customer's needs according to the literature is part of everybody's job and everybody should feel responsible. Quality efforts should be based on a long-term perspective and be part of the overall business strategy including people-related issues such as education and training, performance appraisal, employee involvement, recognition and improving quality of work life. Absolutely necessary is also a quality policy that is understood and easily applicable by organizational members through a use of a common language. It is widely suggested that successful TQM implementation changes the dominant values, organizational structures, the way people work together and the way they feel about participation (van Donk&Sanders, 1993).

The above support the argument made by many authors stating that quality improvement efforts should become part of everybody's job and everybody should feel responsible. Quality improvements should be based on a long-term perspective and be part of the overall business strategy. In this context people should be considered as assets rather than as additional cost upgrading that way the role of the human resource function. Research in the US shows that in organizations, which were awarded the MBNQA, the human resource function's role was essential, but the overall rating on the HR utilization category was not satisfactory. In these cases the personnel professionals were part of the top management team and fully participated in the design and implementation of the organization's quality strategy. (Blackburn&Rosen, 1993). There are limited studies concerning the HR element of the European Quality Award and the reason is that in the academic community the EQA framework is not considered synonymous with TQM but rather such as a business audit approach and a technique within TQM. (McAdam&O'Neill, 1999; Mc Donald, et.al, 2002) A study in Denmark shows that "Danish companies are acting in order to improve the use of human resources in the company and to keep up with competition in the market.

The increase in the resource score reflects that companies are also more focused in 1996 on the effective use of non-human resources in such a way that company goals and strategies are supported" Kristensen & Jørn Juhl (1999). Hamzah & Zairi (1996) in a study of British organizations winning the EQA give the following statement concerning people in one of the organizations studied "LL Bean Inc. is about people and respect for people. This is a way of respecting the talents within the organization. A lot of companies see people as the problem. We saw people as part of the solution" Xerox a winner of the European Quality Award uses extensively benchmarking for HR in the areas of "management development, recruiting, compensation and other personnel processes with the world class competitors" (Sherer, 1995). Vouzas& Gotzamani (2005) in a study in Greece found that "EQA seems to provide a new platform for introducing new practices and upgrading the role of the HR function. Management and utilization of people is at the core of the EQA and it seems that the sample organizations are striving to focus on specific issues and measures, covering all HR-related activities. In some organizations the strategic role of people is still not dynamic. It is considered to be very costly and complex, while respondents realize that there were still high opportunities for improvement in this area. It is obvious that human resources issues were not at the center of the quality strategy formulation and implementation within the sample companies."

4. Survey Objectives and Methodology

In this paper, the author suggest that in order to have a reliable and objective depiction of the human resources element in the Business Excellence and ISO 9000:2000 quality improvement frameworks, a thorough examination and analysis should include all the various approaches and perceptions recorded in literature -some of them based on empirical data and some deriving from rhetoric and "good-stories" or "how things ought to be" perspective. The sample consists of two selected industrial organizations (one Greek and one multinational company) that were judged as normal, ordinary, and representative, one being certified with the ISO 9000 series and the other took the EQA award of the EFQM. The data gathering was carried out through extensive and in - depth interviews in all two organizations asking several multiple informants i.e. the plant manager, the production manager, the personnel manager, using a semi-structured questionnaire with open - ended questions. The main purpose was to collect data and produce basic information, enabling qualitative observations concerning organizations' Quality and HRM efforts, the role and the status of Quality and HR professionals, and the implementation of various human resource initiatives from people being directly involved. Each site was written up as an integrated case study, with the focus on drawing out the commonalties of meaning and understanding each site. The data analysis provide some ground for generalisations, even though subjective judgements were also made from the analysis of the cases.

5. Findings

5.1 Excellence Company A

The company A is the only Greek organization that had won the European Quality Award in the past five years. Company's A journey to quality started through ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 series certification and

continued with the EQA (first attempt was on 1997). The main reason for going for the EQA was the organization's effort to establish a very good brand name domestically and abroad and to move a step forward on its quality improvement efforts. The ingredients of success according to quality manager were the high top management commitment and the participative approach used to design, implement and communicate the various elements and requirements of the EQA framework. However, emphasis was also on improving competitiveness and increasing productivity mainly through financial management techniques (cost reductions). The organization is on a spectacular development stage and a very strong export orientation and establishing strategic supplier alliances abroad.

The organization is a champion in providing Equal Employment Opportunities (70% of personnel are expatriates from the former Soviet Republics and there is also a large amount of disabled employees). Some of the organizations best practices concerning HR issues are the continuous encouragement for employee involvement through suggestion and improvement plans, the open and sincere communication between employees and top management in monthly meetings, employee satisfaction surveys on regular basis, competence-based training, zero accidents (SAFE award from the EU) and family working environment. The HR function implements a series of non-financial rewards such as financial support (loans), Sunday trips, and flexible working hours for disabled employees, special awards and happenings and recognition schemes to valuable employees. Based on the above policies and practices the organizations display a spectacular improvement in many areas. According to company data ninety five percent (97%) of employees consider working in a safe and pleasant working environment, the working hours lost in last two years decreased significantly, career opportunities and career development had been more systematic, almost ninety percent (90%) of employees believe that the products they produce are of highest quality and finally expressed happiness and satisfaction from the training and development programs participated in. The HR function is involved in annual employee attitude surveys aiming at improving working conditions and enhancing employee morale and commitment. However, top management is reluctant to upgrade the HR function and the HR manager role and this is due to the small size of the organization and the predominant role of the owners of the company in all aspects of business activities.

Table III. Profile of sample organizations

	Quality Approach	HR Philosophy, Goals and Vision	HR practices	HR dep't Involvement to Quality
Company A	EQA Winner ISO9001:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HR vision and goals part of the corporate strategy embedded in line management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corporate Social Responsibility Performance-based pay EEO Employee development plans, employee participation strong people-driven culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education and Training for EQA Awareness Building Team design and support Internal and External communication HR Processes justification and measurement
Company B	ISO9001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absence of a written policy and Vision for HR Not quantitative long-term HR goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional/bureaucratic HR practices HR function plays peripheral and supportive role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal, training program Awareness building HR manager not in quality steering committee

The involvement and the role of the HR function in quality efforts and especially in the European Quality Award was essential for achieving the award and for setting a new standard for improvement in the issues related to management of people. A series of HR practices were re-evaluated, documented and measured such as performance appraisal and rewards and others were better utilized i.e. internal communication methods, recruitment & selection and employee training. The most challenging task for the HR was the to support the organization toward building quality awareness for all functions and changing the existing corporate quality culture by incorporating HR issues to all quality procedures and by creating a climate of trust and commitment.

5.2 ISO 9001 Company B

Company B is a multinational organization operating in Greece for many years with a very recognizable brand name and a big market share in its sector. Its main approach to quality improvement is ISO 9001 and is considered very successful in achieving high quality products and increasing productivity. The main reason for ISO 9001 certification was firstly the pressure from the “mother” organization and the increased competition and secondly quality improvement and efficiency in operations. Speaking with the quality manager, the HR manager and the Managing Director it was clear that all considered employees to be very valuable resource and that played a key role in achieving strategic quality goals and objectives. This of course is contradictory with the overall picture of the organization’s HRM practices, the role of the HR department and the lack of a vision and mission for the personnel.

Formal written HR strategy, policy or quantitative goals regarding the management of human resources were absent and this was due to the focus of the organization to other “strategic” areas such as marketing, operations, and public relations. The involvement of the HR manager to the design and launch of ISO 9001 certification was minimal and covered only the development of training programs for quality and awareness building. The HR manager had no authority to review and adjust HR procedures in order to support ISO 9001, to analyze and re-examine past job descriptions, to evaluate previous performance standards for employees, to suggest training methods and learning activities and ways to increase motivation. The HR manager mentioned that he took part in meetings regarding ISO certification (after certificate granted) and received information regarding quality strategic orientation, but he was not part of the quality steering committee. The quality manager claimed that a written policy or quantitative goals for personnel is not prerequisite for ISO certification and considered as unnecessary and costly. A serious obstacle to the involvement of HR department to ISO certifications was also the existence of serious interdepartmental communication problems as well as internal disputes and conflicts. Having that in mind it was extremely difficult for the HR professional to develop a sound, clear and integrated HR policy that can support the certification process and the establishment of an “ISO culture”.

The HR department role in the organization can be characterized as a “peripheral” or “supportive” representing the average small and medium Greek enterprise. The HR department had only two employees, one secretary and one accountant and its most common HRM practices were administrative in nature such as, data filling, employee payroll, employee complaints, disciplinary action, and traditional HR practices (such dismissals, demotions, transfers, working hours and shift patterns). There were no major indexes and matrixes for HR issues (turnover rates, employee satisfaction, evaluation of education and training programs, induction, labor productivity, etc) and core HR practices like performance appraisal system, rewards and recognition schemes were absent for employees at the shop floor. The above come to support research evidence that when “hard” approach to quality is adopted combined with a weak HR department with no strategic orientation, then “people” issues are often neglected and the quality improvement efforts are partially satisfied. The argument is more realistic since top management commitment in ISO certified organizations is poor and furthermore top level management is probably not aware of the advantages the “new strategic HRM” practices and the effect these practices might have to the organization’s overall quality effectiveness and efficiency. Furthermore, in the organization studied the existing organizational HR culture and generally the overall corporate philosophy of human resources utilization seemed to promote quality improvement efforts through ISO 9000 series in a rather bureaucratic manner in which there is no innovation, promotion of new ideas, opportunities to be gained and best practices to be implemented.

6. Conclusions

It is quite obvious from the above analysis that there is an enormous distance between the HR requirements of the awards and those of ISO 9001. The ISO 9001 is no more than an “audit of procedures” with not substantial HR context and content and on the other side the awards are concerned with HR both in relation to people management and satisfaction/results. The ISO 9001 seemed to represent the minimum effort on HR practices and policies an organization should present in order to achieve third party certification but quality award and specifically EQA award requires proof of systematic design and implementation of HR policies and practices. However, many argue that a company cannot win one of the quality awards without first being able to satisfy the requirements of the ISO 9001. It seems that ISO 9001 certified organizations

although are aware of the fundamental principles and tools of continuous quality improvement but still are in the early stages of a company-wide approach to quality improvement. The author believe that one of the most prevailing factors contributing to the delay of the establishment of a “quality-based” culture and a move towards strategic Total Quality Management are the short period of systematic implementation of quality assurance systems and the preoccupation with the so-called “hard” aspects of quality.

The existence of vision and a mission for Human Resources followed by systematic design and implementation of Strategic HRM practices seemed to be the main issues that differentiate ISO 9001 organizations from EQA organizations according to the literature. However, according to other studies EQA organizations problematic area is that of Human Resources (Vouzaz & Gotzamani, 2005; McAdam & O'Neill, 1999). The prevailing HR practices absent from the ISO 9001 organization are the communication to employees of the corporate quality mission, designing and implementing programmes for employee empowerment and developing or applying TQM principles, practices and techniques within the HR function.

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