Culture As a Successor of Quality Initiatives: A Review

Archana Krishnan

Research Scholar, Faculty of Management Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi

archanakrishnan85@gmail.com

Abstract

Quality management has been extensively used for few decades now. Organisations worldwide have leveraged the concept of quality to achieve their goals and survive the tides of competition. Organisational culture represents a collective belief and values of the organisation's members. Literatures relating to quality initiatives and organisational culture have repeatedly described that organisational culture study is imperative to implementation of quality initiatives. Now, with an aim to digress the focus from culture as a predecessor to quality initiatives, attempt has been made to find out the scope of research of impact of various quality initiatives on organisational culture as the organisation evolves. It would be of much interest to the young managers to understand the implications of process improvements on the organisational culture. Changes in processes may bring changes in the values, beliefs, attitudes of the individuals engaged in process improvements. The culture, thus created will instil a confidence to take up any change activity for organisational development and facilitate in surviving the stress and strains of any unpredictable environment.

Keywords: Quality initiatives, Quality Management, Organisational Culture

Introduction

With each passing day, organisations are facing a serious competition towards delivery of outstanding products and services. Globalisation of the economy has brought immense pressure on the smallest to the biggest organisations towards satisfying the end customers. In an era in which the products and service procedures are getting outdated in a short span of time, there is a pressing need for the organisations to keep reinventing the wheel. This requires a serious relook on the kind of existing processes and plugging the deficiencies in the system. Quality initiatives were institutionalised initially to improve the financial performance of organisations. But over the years, the main focus has shifted towards the need to improve the organisational processes by encouraging employee participation and focussing on improvements at operational levels (Adebanjo *et al*., 2010). Quality management provides the solution where organisations can continuously improve the processes with pan- hierarchy involvement and take itself to the crescendo. It also acts as a mechanism for integration where the organisations stand united to lift their organisation to the next level of standard.

Previous studies have thrown light on the importance of understanding the culture of the organisation as an essential requirement prior to the implementation of quality initiatives. Organisation culture studies have been so far perceived as a determining factor for any change implementation. As the management confusion of which came first - chicken and egg, researchers are also embroiled in the ambiguity whether culture is the necessary forerunner to implementation of quality initiatives or implementation of quality initiatives leads to a significant impact on culture. Though, there is enough evidence of research on why organisational culture is precursor to quality, not much light has been thrown on culture as a dependent variable. The paper thus proposes a shift from the present ways of studying the quality and looks at its possible impact on culture within organisations. Changes in processes may bring changes in the values, beliefs, attitudes of the individuals engaged in process improvements. The whole essence of quality management is such that the organisations witness a paradigm shift in the behaviour of those involved which eventually evolves the culture of the work place.

Review

Quality has been expressed in a variety of meanings. In the book *Total Quality Control*, 'quality' has been defined as meeting or exceeding the expectations of the customer's (Feigenbaum, 1961). This is also defined in the book *Quality is Free* as conformance to requirements in the production context (Crosby, 1979). Quality incorporates a predictable degree of uniformity and dependability at low cost which is suited to satisfy the wants (Deming, 1982). Quality has been defined in the cultural context as acheivement of goals through integration of tools, techniques and training (Sashkin and Kiser, 1993).

Culture theorists have described culture in a number of ways. Culture is a system of collectively accepted meanings for a group (Pettigrew, 1979). Hofstede *et al*. (1990) described culture through characteristics such as holistic, historically determined, related to anthropology, constructed socially, soft and difficult to change. It has also been explained by Schein (1990) as a pattern of basic assumptions developed by a group. Westbrook (1993) defined culture as an organisations language, symbol, artefacts and patterns of behaviour, basic underlying assumptions and sub cultures.

Researchers have examined quality initiatives such as continuous improvement, benchmarking, quality circles, 5S, Six Sigma (Klefsjo *et al*., 2001), employee involvement, lean management, Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA), ISO 9000 (Waldman and Addae, 1995), workers participation, reengineering, quality audits, quality assurance, customer focus, leadership, Just in Time (JIT) systems to name a few which have been implemented mostly in the manufacturing industries. In the same vein, Singh *et al*., (2009) studied impact of quality initiatives such as Just in Time (JIT), 5S tools, suggestion schemes, worker's participation and ISO 9000 on performance of small and medium manufacturing enterprises. Wiele and Brown (2002) have mentioned in their study on how focus

has shifted from merely relying on quality awards to initiatives such as continuous improvement teams, employee's participation, team work, communication and use of quality audits which allow them to stay quality conscious.

Initiatives like customer focus, training and education, empowerment, teamwork, continuous improvement and problem prevention were studied by Karia and Asaari (2006) in relation to work related attitudes like job involvement, job satisfaction, career satisfaction and organisational commitment in a Malaysian setting. In the same vein, Yasin and Alavi (2007) focused on the implementation level of quality initiatives such as continuous improvement, process reengineering, Just in Time system (JIT), organisational restructuring, job reengineering and benchmarking in service organisation's operational settings. Integrated Total Quality Management (ITQM) consisting of practices such as ISO 9001: 2000, Quality Management System (QMS), Six Sigma (DMAIC), TQM, knowledge management and lean thinking were studied in higher educational institutions by Pandi *et al*. (2009). Chen (2004) conducted an in-depth research in implementation of quality management in private pharmaceutical distributor company in Taiwan with a specific focus on training and team formation. While shifting focus from private sector banks, Al-Shobaki *et al*. (2010) in their research involving public sector banks in Jordon mentioned the lack of research in measuring and controlling the quality in the banks.

Process improvement methods greatly influence and are significantly influenced by the culture of the organisations. Vast studies have been conducted on culture as a forerunner to implementation of quality initiatives. Theorists have opined that institutionalising quality without understanding the existing beliefs and values of the work place could lead to a complete failure in doing the same. They have also opined that quality initiatives must be tailor made to suit the organisation's culture for its effective implementation. Shortell *et al*. (1995) studied the relationship between organisational culture and quality management. The research involving 61 US hospitals revealed that organisations having participative, flexible and risk taking culture had positive results during the improvement initiatives such as continuous improvements, customer focus, structured processes and organisational wide participation and quality assurance. The concept of continuous improvement was first given by Imai (1986) in which the importance to praising and encouraging the employees and focus on developing and nurturing the human resource, are stressed upon. Continuous improvement requires employee commitment towards quality improvements in its administrative and technical processes which are helpful in meeting customer expectations (Dean and Bowen, 1994).

In their research, Revere *et al*. (2004) have described six sigma as a method that aims at reducing waste, improves customer satisfaction and financal results. This also involves designing and monitoring business processes. Zu *et al*. (2006) through their research illustrate that group culture, development culture and regional culture are essential in implementing six sigma quality initiative. Quality circles are defined as 'small groups of volunteers' from the same work area who meet regularly to

identify, analyse and solve quality related problems in their area of responsibility (Munchus, 1983). It is essential for the top management to understand the characteristics of the organisation especially the organisation's culture and increase knowledge about best conditions for deployment before institutionalisation of such programmes (Luzon,1988).

Business process reengineering has been defined as 'fundamental rethinking and radical redesign' of business processes to achieve dramatic improvements in critical, contemporary measures of performance such as cost, service and speed by Hammer and Champy (1993) in their seminal work. This needs changes in culture wherein members are encouraged to give suggestions for developing business processes and creating challenging, rewarding jobs which are much better designed. Employee involvement involves encouraging employee participation in the work area, allowing them to make suggestions at work and involving them in everyday planning and monitoring related to the organisational processes. Val *et al*. (2006) mention that employee involvement develops in certain types of organsiation cultures which possess characteristics such as trust, creativity and definitive vision.

Tannenbaum *et al*. (1961) define leadership as an interpersonal influence that is exercised by a leader in a situation through the process of communication for attaining certain objectives. Leaders must initiate training and education which must then trickle down to the quality teams and other organisational members. Jung *et al*. (2008) investigated the impact of Hofstede's five national cultural elements including power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long term orientation on quality management initiatives such as leadership, strategic planning, customer and market focus, measurement analysis and knowledge management, human resources focus, process management and business results in MNC's of different nations such as USA, Mexico and China having different national cultures.

Knowledge management is the ability of an organisation to use its knowledge through knowledge generation, sharing and use of technology to achieve its objectives (Cong and Pandya, 2003). It is also defined as 'justified true belief' (Nonaka, 1994). Curren *et al*. (1992) opine that knowledge management improves the strategic action as it helps managers in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of competitors. This leads to gaining insights into customer's attitudes. Knowledge management lets managers to analyse and evaluate the conditions in the immediate environment and take suitable decisions. Islam *et al*. (2008) opine that a renovation in an organisation's culture is needed to publicize the concept of knowledge management. Knowledge management requires the changes in employee attitudes to freely share knowledge without any inhibitions for collective good of the organisations.

Benchmarking is a continuous, systematic process of measuring products, services and practices against the companies considered to be superior with the idea of bridging any performance 'gaps' (Kouzmin *et al*., 1999). Benchmarking over the years has been used in various industries such as IT, ITES, automobile, pharmaceutical, healthcare, aviation, hospitality, tourism to name a few.

Benchmarking has been prevalent in private as well as public sectors. In the recent past, the level of implementation and success has been low in public sector organisations owing to fixed budgets and competition due to scarcity of resources (Carer, 1991). Benchmarking during management of new product development depends on firms culture and climate for innovation (Cooper and Kleinschmidt, 1995).

Service orientation has been defined by Hogan *et al.* (1984) as attitudes and behaviours affecting interaction between employees of the organisation and its customers. Lytle *et al.* (1998) defined service orientation as organization-wide embracement of organizational policies, practices and procedures which are aimed at supporting and rewarding service-giving behaviours that create and deliver 'service excellence'. In an extension to this, Maull *et al.* (2001) proposed elements such as Personal, Customer Orientation and Organisational and Cultural issues (PCOC) model for organisational culture which facilitates quality improvement through development and focused interventions. Understanding the organisational culture prior to implementing QM procedures does help in making the organisation effective in the long run. Organisational culture is a social control that puts emphasis on the attitudes and behaviours which are appropriate (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1996).

There are sufficient literatures that explain in length that organisational culture is an important factor that determines the effectiveness of the quality techniques and tools. While shifting the focus from culture as a predecessor to quality initiatives, there is a scope of research into the impact of various quality initiatives on organisational culture as the organisation evolves. Changes in processes often bring changes in the values, beliefs, attitudes of the individuals engaged in process improvements.

Quality management warrants the need of active participation of all employees across the hierarchy through team culture. Culture acts as '*glue*' which holds a growing group together and acts as a source of identity and strength (Schein, 1984). Adhering to quality culture requires the close coordination of every department. The collaboration among the members often breaks boundaries created by positions, status and power associated with the roles. This gives rise to formation of personal bond among the members with a high level of cohesion. Collaboration between the management and the employees can develop and sustain only with considerable level of trust. Administration of controlling techniques such as quality audit by the senior leaders ensures that employees can take this as an opportunity to act together to achieve goals collectively. Regular regime of inspections eventually develops quality conscious employees who are always vigilant towards detection of possible deficiencies or total failure of the system. It also creates new norms of employee conduct and professionalism. This needs a considerable level of pro-activeness in understanding the interdependency of the processes and identify the possible failure modes. Such an ability of employees leads to high success rate of quality implementation. Further, continuous quality improvements need the employees to

be innovative in delivering better quality of product or service in a more customised fashion. This orientation towards customers interest formulates employee values and beliefs towards client service. Management's open talk about the success or failure of the improvement methods shapes the employee's perception relating to company's activities. Employees appreciate truthful and honest information about the status of change that is implemented as they feel themselves very much a part of the transition. Organisations must develop a culture that fosters learning, sharing and creation of knowledge through members across the hierarchy (Malhotra, 2003).

Leadership by senior management involves laying sufficient trust in the process level employees. Such values must be aligned in the direction of QM efforts. Values of trust, openness, participation and harmony, group affiliation should be shared among the members, employees and all other stakeholders. Thus, a culture of trust, innovation, teamwork, renewed vision and pro-activity may be developed. The culture thus created will modify the existing reactive behaviour of employees, instil a sense of confidence to take up any change activity for organisational development and facilitate in surviving the stress and strains of any unpredictable environment.

Conclusions

Unquestionably, a unique organisation culture can be developed with quality practices when the employees are provided with all key information that is needed for change, work in tandem with each other, identify with the organisational goals, follow norms and values that can certainly help in withstanding the tyrannies of the competition. It has been observed through the review of various literatures that there is a considerable gap in knowledge addition to organisational culture as a successor to quality initiatives. If at all, the studies have mentioned only about few individual aspects that constitute culture. Further, though much work has been done in the manufacturing sector regarding the quality activities around the world, service industry and the NGO's have only recently started the implementation of QM. The same has been reflected in the vast resources of references about the quality implementation in the manufacturing industry. This shows that there is a considerable dearth in the research work related to quality initiatives in the service organisations. The topic in question can further be tested for its validity empirically. Apart from testing the impact of implementation of quality initiatives on organisational culture, industry-wise comparison could also be done to understand the level of implementation in specific industries. Quality management can provide an opportunity for the organisations to witness a paradigm shift in their cultures with the behavioural change in all process members. Changing technology makes even the most recent product innovations and service methods as things of the past, so much so that it leads to putting a question mark on organisation's own existence. In such a scenario organisations cannot afford to maintain their status quo. Organisations continuously need to undergo transition of change challenging their own quality practices, which otherwise will result in complacency and hence retardation of the firm. Culture of 'sameness' explains the lackadaisical attitude of

the leaders responsible for transforming the organisations. Unless individual leaders show their personal will to bring change in their area of work, quality management will remain only as a bookish theory.

In view of the above, it is not only essential for senior management to implement quality tools and techniques in the firms but also to question whether such a practice is actually creating a healthy culture where individuals work together and devote their time and creative energies wholeheartedly. Else, this has to be taken as a wakeup call for the leaders to go back to their drawing boards and plan an effective implementation mechanism which will help in building a culturally sound organisation capable enough to meet the nail biting competition.

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