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## Journey to Excellence

Total-quality management is a major movement in business and industry. The concept is spreading rapidly through social services, hospitals and health care systems, academic and financial organizations, and other areas of our society. Consumers, clients, audiences, and constituencies—the customers—are more sophisticated than ever. They expect high-quality products and services. They patronize establishments that meet their expectations. Total quality is a genuine trend. It is not a fad. Total quality is a way of organizational life, a cultural phenomenon.

As for any organizational transformation, beginning such a journey is difficult. Some organizations may give up when goals are vague or results not immediate. Understanding the nature of the change helps senior managers, directors, and consultants plan the journey and chart the progress. There are many approaches to total-quality transformation. This article describes one path which is proving successful in both public and private, profit and non-profit sectors. The process complements sound management practice, such as strategic planning. Every organization is unique. Each is at a different place in transformation to a total-quality culture. Anyone—manager, staff member, board member, or consultant—who works as a change agent must meet the organization and its people where they are in the journey.

## Total Quality as Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is more than shared understandings. It is the outcome of all the forces that have shaped the organization in the past and that will determine its future. Culture is the pattern of basic assumptions that the organization has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with the problems of adapting to its environment and integrating itself internally. These assumptions have worked well enough to be considered valid. They are taught to new members as the “right” way to perceive, think, and feel. Many patterns of the organization—the way we operate around here—become so ingrained that they are subconscious and therefore not debatable. They are basic assumptions. Other patterns—values—are more explicit and open to discussion.

Total-quality efforts often run against many of the basic assumptions in traditional organizational culture. Until the organization makes basic assumptions explicit, total quality remains a good intention at best, a miserable disappointment otherwise. Management and labor each naturally reinforce behavior that supports their own assumptions and values. The culture often does not reinforce on-the-job use of quality processes. Management, even as it espouses total quality, may consciously or unconsciously suppress quality efforts that present new ways of thinking contrary to the traditional culture. Developing a total-quality organization involves for many establishments a change in culture. Such a transformation requires learning new ways to perceive the world, a paradigm shift. In spite of some anecdotes to the

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contrary, the process takes time, perhaps three to five years, with committed management and directors. Some organizations will not complete the journey. In a “can-do” national culture, short-term results have traditionally dominated management thinking.

## The Critical Beginning

Senior management must lead the way. Senior managers must make a conscious, informed decision that the organization will change. They must become role models. In a culture embodying values like empowerment, consensus, teamwork, continuous improvement, and openness to new ideas, good management is more important than ever. Becoming such a role model is not easy, nor is it without risk and pain. But it is necessary. Good intentions are not enough. Management needs a road map, a process by which it can guide the organization into the new world. Acknowledging vulnerability and need for help is the first step in learning. Organizational consultants can provide objectivity, new insights, and needed process skills. Networking with other organizations on their own total-quality journeys is equally important.

## A Process Model

Through practical experience with large and small organizations, a model of the initial phases of the journey of transformation has emerged. Total quality is a journey, not a destination. The concept implies continuous improvement. The process described here is not a recipe. It is a guide—to be considered, followed, deviated from, and modified as the particular organization, its management team, board of directors, customers, and environment determine. Consultants can help, but management must take responsibility for its own process.

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## Values in Some Traditional Organizational Cultures

- **Bigness Obsession:** Success is measured by how big or profitable we are. Charge what the market will bear, expand, grow in size.
- **Departmental View:** We measure success by how well this department does. We're the best; let the rest of the organization do as well as it can.
- **Closed System:** We know what is true and best in our field. Outsiders cannot understand it, and thus they cannot really contribute. Reject what was not invented or discovered here.
- **Individual Competition:** As the pyramid still narrows at the top, we are in competition with one another for fewer and fewer positions as our careers progress. Sorry if I step on you from time to time.
- **Individual Responsibility:** I am responsible for my job, you for yours. If I do better than you, I get promoted or rewarded, and you do not.
- **Different Processes:** We use what works for this department. That's the way we have always done it; it works for us.
- **Within Tolerance:** We believe that there is a certain point at which further improvements are not necessary. If it isn't broken, don't fix it.
- **Short-Term Focus:** All we need to do is get through another day, put out the fires, and make a dollar or two. Tomorrow will have to take care of itself.

## Values in a Total Quality Culture

- **Customer Obsession:** We exist to meet customer needs. Success and growth depend on satisfied audiences, constituents, and customers.
- **System View:** We consider the organization as a whole, intentionally suboptimizing parts as necessary so that the whole can be optimal.
- **Open System:** We accept new ideas from outside the field and adapt them as appropriate. We encourage creative/innovative approaches.
- **Teamwork:** We work together, sharing, listening, building on one another's ideas without undue attention to awarding individual credit.
- **Shared Responsibility:** We succeed or fail as a team. Each person has a personal commitment to the success of the organization and the profession or field.
- **Common Process:** We know and use the same language and disciplined process in problem solving, planning, and improvement efforts.
- **Continuous Improvement:** We believe that there is no "there," no perfect solution; we are always seeking improvement.
- **Balanced Focus:** Board and staff members balance long-term goals with necessary short-term objectives.

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The model involves six phases. It is more holistic than it appears. Although depicted as distinct sets of activities, in practice the six phases overlap, and activities begun in one phase often continue or recycle through other phases. Again, every organization is unique. Readiness for change, already established processes, management style, and organizational purpose all suggest adaptations in the basic model. Nevertheless, the model provides a useful road map and a vehicle for examining the role of organizational change toward total quality.

## Phase One: Orientation and Self-Assessment

Phase One experientially introduces the organization's senior management team to the concepts of a total-quality culture. The team then makes an informed decision whether to undertake the journey. Through self-assessment, often based on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Criteria, the team gains an appreciation of critical issues it faces. At the culmination of Phase One, the management team:

- Assesses the organization against recognized, established criteria.
- Has a statement of present state, desired state, and interim quality goals.
- Considers options in undertaking a total-quality journey.

The keystone of this initial phase is self-assessment through a comprehensive questionnaire covering recognized criteria for total quality. A quality consultant usually administers the survey, tallies the results, and feeds the information back to the team. The team develops a sense of the issues it faces as it comes to consensus in identifying pressing quality issues. The management team uses the data from the self-assessment to define a gap between the organization's present state and the team's vision of what quality means.

Phase one is necessarily heavy on consultant input, although major decisions, such as the composition of the management team, belong to the organization's executives. Nevertheless, the consultant assures that near the end of Phase One the management team is aware of options. The team makes a decision whether to continue its exploration of total quality. Phase One is essentially an awareness-building process. How quickly a management team completes this phase depends on its enthusiasm and commitment—and those of the consultant. Phase One should move promptly. An anticipated target time is about two to four weeks.

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## Phase Two: Preparation and Learning

Phase Two provides the senior management team with essential knowledge and skills that enable it to undertake a long-term organizational transformation effort. There is also some immediate return on investment—a payoff in using the quality processes—which encourages the team and reinforces total-quality values. In Phase Two, the management team internalizes the basic quality processes and tools in preparation for cascading them through the organization. At the culmination of Phase Two, the management team:

- Understands and uses the basic quality processes—managers prepare to be mentors.
- Has an interim quality plan.
- Commits itself and the organization to the long-range total-quality journey (strategic quality planning).

## Training

Training enables the management team to internalize key quality processes. Some management teams are already quite proficient in the basic processes. Others have had little or no preparation. Through an assessment of its training needs, the team identifies learning experiences that prepare the team for the journey. Training includes:

1. **Team or Individual Training.** Senior managers, in assessing their readiness for embarking on the organizational transformation journey, may determine that they need training either as a team or as individuals. Such training might include team building, benchmarking, facilitation skills, management-style awareness, statistical process control, planning, or other knowledge and skills. The consultant refers the team or individual managers to appropriate sources (commercial houses, educational organizations, reading programs, network/support groups, and so on). In some cases, the consultant delivers the appropriate training or development experience.
2. **Quality Training.** As senior managers learn and internalize the basic quality processes, they become resident experts—champions and mentors of total quality. Eventually they facilitate the process with action teams, working with the quality consultant to cascade the processes through the organization. The consultant is key to helping the management team assess itself in the use of quality processes.

Quality training should be internalized by senior managers before action teams undertake improvement projects. By thoroughly learning the quality process skills through application, then teaching them to the next staff level, the management team cascades the skills through the organization.

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## The Cascading Process

The cascading process varies. Relatively “flat” organizations may begin training action teams in essential quality skills early, accelerating the process. Senior managers, however, are still the role models, coaches, and mentors.

Although organizations are not transformed overnight, there are practical short-range payoffs to total quality efforts. If some more immediate benefit is not forthcoming, the organization may lose heart. The organization’s leadership balances commitment to strategic thinking with quality improvement projects. The relatively short-range projects reinforce quality skills, such as problem solving and process improvement.

Organizational leaders prepare themselves to become champions of total quality and mentors in the quality processes. They learn and habitually use the quality tools. They develop a total-quality mind-set. Eventually, the system becomes self-sustaining. Outside consultants provide essential knowledge and skills and assist the organization in its learning. They also provide an objective view of what is going on in the organization.

For organizations with little experience in long-range planning, the interim (first-year) quality plan is an excellent learning vehicle. Strategic quality plans usually include cascading the quality processes and skills throughout the organization as a whole.

Phase Two is essentially an educational process. The training itself might be expected to take between six and ten days, depending on the management team’s present level of expertise. Scheduling the training and assuring its proper application (train, apply, mentor, follow-up) could take a significant period of time—six months to a year, depending on readiness and willingness for change.

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## Phase Three: Strategic Quality Planning

In Phase Three the senior management team plans for long-term organizational change. The team takes the strategic viewpoint in developing a plan that may span as long as five years and will be revised considerably as it unfolds. The eventual goal is to integrate total-quality concepts with organizational practices. The business plan and the quality plan become one. At the culmination of Phase Three, the management team:

- Continues to use and reinforce the basic quality processes.
- Has a five-year strategic quality plan.
- Continues commitment to the long-range total-quality journey, and develops commitment throughout the organization.

The planning process begins with mission and vision statements. These concise documents provide direction for organizational management. Mission, vision, and policy statements, developed and negotiated in Phase Two, now become the cornerstones of the long-range quality plan. The strategic planning process generally follows this sequence:

1. **Desired Future State.** Through the visioning process the management team develops a detailed description of the desired future state. This desired future statement, along with the vision statement, becomes a “star to steer by.” Developing the future scenario calls for creative thinking, a personal vision, and the extrapolation of key trends in the organization and its environment.
2. **Present-State Assessment.** A detailed assessment of the present state provides the base to define the journey. The assessment is based on a review of the Phase One self-assessment, reassessment of quality goals, strategic plans already in place, and feedback from customers and employees.
3. **Planning the Transition.** The management team develops long-term goals and strategy and plans the necessary steps to achieve them. Transition planning also includes responsibility and commitment planning and surfacing/testing of assumptions. Depending on the organization’s experience with long-range planning, the quality plan may be integrated with the business plan.

Strategic plans result in action plans, specific statements of how departmental and cross-functional teams will implement the strategic vision. Action plans include negotiated responsibilities, statements of resources needed, success measures, and target dates. The implementation teams review their action plans periodically. An important part of this planning is developing preventive and contingency plans to deal with potential problems that may jeopardize success.

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Before action teams can become effectively involved, they must be trained in quality principles and skills. Either the management team members or an outside consultant may take the trainer role. A member of the senior management team, however, is present at each team training session, modeling behaviors, demonstrating commitment, establishing direction and boundaries, and providing process expertise.

Phase Three is essentially a planning process. The planning process may be done in four or five days. Some management teams may go on retreat for this purpose. Most teams, however, distribute planning meetings over four to twelve weeks. The effort may involve others, such as the board of directors, as the team considers organizational direction.

## Phase Four: Implementation

In Phase Four the management team implements the strategic quality plan, while continuing progress toward short-range quality objectives along the way. At the culmination of Phase Four, the management team:

- Has achieved some of its initial quality goals for the organization.
- Has continuously assessed progress through review meetings.
- Continues commitment to the long-term total-quality journey and develops commitment throughout the organization.
- Has successfully cascaded training regarding quality principles and skills through the organization.

In the transition phase, the period between the present reality and the desired future state, the management team directs its energies toward enabling departmental and cross-functional action teams to bring about interim and long-range goals. The management team is involved in activities such as:

- Reviewing action plan progress
- Building commitment
- Training
- Facilitating and coaching action teams in problem solving and quality improvement
- Changing reward systems
- Role modeling

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## Progress Reviews

An important part of implementation are periodic progress reviews. Plans not reviewed are worthless. Progress reviews focus on the output from each step in the action plans and the target dates. Although the action teams prepare their own review schedules, senior management monitors and supports the process. Teams review plans frequently, so they can address implementation issues while there is time to affect the outcomes. For the management team the questions are: Are we on track? If not, why not? What needs to be changed? Answers to these questions lead the team to appropriate action.

- Progress as planned. If progress toward quality goals is on plan, the management team and the action teams have done a fine job of assessing the situation and planning. They might ask, however, if they can do better—upgrade the goal.
- Progress better than expected. What has changed? The team may upgrade the goal or reallocate resources.
- Progress less than expected. What has changed? The team may reinforce the plan with additional time, effort, people or other resources, or goal expectations may need to be reduced.

In some cases, environmental conditions may have made the goal and plan impractical. The team may abandon the goal or replan. Progress reviews take place through regularly scheduled meetings. Face-to-face reviews are more effective than casual phone calls. The coming together of a team enhances commitment and enthusiasm. The team needs to be clear about what results are expected at what point in time. The frequency of review depends on many factors, such as the experience of the team, confidence in the process, and changing environmental conditions.

Phase Four is essentially an execution and monitoring process. Timing depends on the complexity of the plans and the enthusiasm, willingness, and capability of the management team. Implementation is ongoing, as teams update and complete initial plans and develop new ones.

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## Phase Five: Evaluation

In Phase Five the management team evaluates progress toward strategic quality goals. Phase Five is not time bounded; it is a continuous process. As each goal is attained, management reassesses the organization in preparation for upgrading the strategic plan. The team begins recycling through the planning process as it evaluates the plan. The desired result of the process is the integration of the quality plan and the organization's strategic business plan. The organization considers total quality as a way of life as it establishes and consolidates the new culture. Throughout Phase Five activities, the management team and action teams:

- Confirm that a goal has indeed been achieved.
- Examine the process of transition management.
- Feed back the results of the work into the strategic plan for upgrading and revision.

Evaluation is not something the management team does only at or near the end of a strategic plan. Rather, the team builds evaluation into the plan. The organization's leadership selects or develops measures of success so that progress toward the goal can be adequately determined all along the way.

Nevertheless, when a strategic goal is attained or abandoned, a more comprehensive evaluation is appropriate. Evaluation is more than answering the question "Did we achieve our goal?" Evaluation addresses (with the proverbial 20/20 hindsight) other issues: Was the goal appropriate? Was the strategy a wise one? Were the critical success factors and measures correctly analyzed and planned? Did we have the needed data? Was our plan realistic, yet challenging? What would we do differently? Were our customer requirements met? What must we continue monitoring?

The organization begins a higher-level self-assessment. Documentation of progress and processes in the new present state provides data for continuous improvement. Outside audits (customer audits, panels of visitors, or consultants) also provide insight into the effectiveness of planning and implementation efforts. These audits provide an invaluable view of the organization. Evaluation, like implementation, is essentially an ongoing process. Timing depends on the complexity of the plans and the enthusiasm, willingness, and capability of the management and staff. The process continues as initial plans are updated and completed and others take their place. By the time the management team is engaged in evaluation, the organization is beginning to consider planning, implementing, and evaluating for continuous improvement a continuous cycle.

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## Phase Six: Continuous Improvement

In Phase Six the organization approaches subconscious competence: people internalize the concepts of total quality and integrate them into their daily work life. They put principle into practice habitually. Total quality becomes a way of life—just the way things are done around here.

The keystone in Phase Six is customer obsession. Management and labor understand the expectations of their customers. The organization becomes a valued supplier. People take a collaborative approach within the organization and the larger community, facilitated by the quality processes.

The emphasis throughout the organization is not on catching and fixing problems, but on process improvement—preventing poor quality. Employees, empowered to make changes toward enhancing total quality, make decisions appropriate to their part in the total operation and take the initiative to assure continuous improvement. Further, they consider themselves and their department as part of the whole organization, taking a systems view of their work world. Teams and teamwork are the vehicles for continuous improvement. A shared responsibility and sense of cohesion elicit the best thinking from everyone.

Senior management still must lead the way. Managers ensure that the quality processes are being used correctly. They continue to be coaches, mentors, and role models for the new organizational culture. The organization by this time has a common language of quality. People use quality processes such as problem solving and the continuous-improvement cycle to enhance communication and efficiency.

Another aspect in this phase of the process is sharing. A total-quality organization advocates an openness in supporting other organizations in their journeys. Managers find themselves visiting or hosting their counterparts from other organizations, sharing process information and experiences about quality. Sharing expertise is a way of life.

Phase Six is really a continuation of the journey. Like the rest of the total-quality process, it is not bounded in time or scope. Planning, implementing, and evaluating phases become blended as the cyclic process matures. Even when an organization develops what it describes as a total-quality culture, the task is far from complete. By its very nature, the new culture welcomes change as it explores new ideas and new concepts. Change is still uncomfortable, and management must encourage continuous improvement. The question is not “Will the organization change?” It will. Management asks instead, “How is the organization changing, and how do we want it to change?”

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## Summary

Planning and implementing total quality means changing the organization culture, a relatively long-range approach. Many organizations with the best of intentions falter because they lack a vision or a plan that helps them see and work toward a desired future. The map is not the territory, but a rendering of the terrain. The process model attempts to document one way of beginning the total quality journey and sustaining the effort until it becomes self-reinforcing. This model is certainly not the only route. It is, however, a tested approach, and one that carries a high probability of success.

Total quality is a journey, not a destination. The journey carries its own rewards. The organizations of the future will be total-quality organizations, because others will have no future.

