T. Q. M. FOR UNIVERSITIES :
CAN WE PRACTICE WHAT WE PREACH?

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ABSTRACT

The issue of T.Q.M. for an institution of higher education is, supposedly, a simple one. For what could be simpler than implementing the very ideas, which we find so redeeming and worthwhile - and preach them to our students as gospel? A superficial observation of the university scene would have us believe that nothing could be simpler than that, that the academic world is the perfect example of an institution - guided by such values as truth and freedom - where TQM can most readily be implemented, with glowing results. It turns out to be not quite so simple.

The issue of TQM in higher education is hampered by a number of separate - although related - problems:

Definition of quality in a university setting

Academic freedom

Dual control

Tenure

The prima ballerina effect

Management rotation

In this presentation we look into these factors and examine their affects on the goal of achieving TQM in institutions of higher education. Each factor is analyzed, and its affect on the TQM goal is illuminated. It is unfortunate that the conclusion is that TQM in our institutions is invariably extremely difficult if not totally unattainable.

1. INTRODUCTION

Total Quality Management is a popular term among many management theoreticians and practitioners. In this paper, we will show the difficulties encountered by people that straddle both sides of the issues - the managers in academia. We will take the term 'Total Quality Management' and examine closely each word, separately, to see if their combination is a concept which, in a university setting, can be applied successfully.

We will start with a short description of quality in academia, continue to explore the special aspects of management in the academic world, and then take the last word of the three which make up TQM - the very first word, total - and see if it can be applied to those settings. We offer some conclusions in the end.

2. QUALITY IN ACADEMIA

In this chapter, we'll briefly look at the salient features of quality in the academic world and the difficulties created, at the start, by the various definitions of this term, when applied to institutions of higher education. We will see that the issue of quality, while far from being simple in general, is even more complicated in a university setting.

2.1. DEFINITION OF QUALITY IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

Quality in a university setting is an elusive concept. Whereas other fields of endeavor may lend themselves more readily to definitions of quantifiable and measurable goals, purposes and missions, those of universities are less obvious and definitely less easily calculable. Is the goal the creation of new knowledge, the training of the next generation of scientists, the education of the future generation? Another mission currently considered by many of the universities prospective 'customers' (not necessarily shared by the institutions) is that of providing them with employable - and readily marketable - skills. Obviously, the institution's mission must be defined and measurable before any lower-level goals can be set (Peratec, 1994).

2.2. MEASUREMENT ISSUES

Even if goals are agreed upon, there are still many insurmountable obstacles, not the least of which is that of measurements. For one, how is creation of new knowledge measured? How are new scientists appraised, compared and ranked, and within a reasonable time frame? What is the proper procedure for assessing such variables as the level of education provided to a group of students? How are marketable and employable skills computed - does a general, liberal arts degree count or do we consider only 'hard' professional degrees such as medicine, engineering and accounting?

The measurement problem is further complicated by the very long time it takes for some of the results to be manifested (as in knowledge creation or in the emergence of new scientists); by the difficulty in attributing specific activities to those goals (does teaching really matter, or would those young scientists still be created, motivated by their own curiosity and ambition); the uncertainty of the results obtained by the introduction of various techniques, etc.

3. MANAGEMENT IN ACADEMIA

In this chapter, we will discuss another of the two words that make up TQM, namely management. We'll see that management of institutions of higher education is curbed by a number of constraints. These include academic freedom, tenure, the prima ballerina effect and management rotation. All of these will be discussed.

3.1. ACADEMIC FREEDOM

While academic freedom is a property of higher education that should be respected, honored and safeguarded, it is, regrettably, sometimes used as an almost indefatigable defense of very non-quality type of behavior.

Academicians are quite fond of teaching management, but at the same time they are usually quite opposed to letting such mundane considerations as efficiency, cost-savings, streamlining, etc. infringe on their time-honored (absolute) academic freedom. While critically important for safeguarding the basic freedom of research, teaching and uninhibited thought - all unquestioned ingredients of any higher education system - the academic freedom cover has, at times, served to hide some agendas that have nothing to do with the above principles.

3.2. TENURE

Tenure, while a desirable outcome of the academic freedom necessary for the proper functioning of universities, poses great difficulties when administrative controls need implementing. Flexibility is an unquestioned must in the process of instituting change, and the ability to change assignments, redefine job functions, changing job contents and - unavoidable at times - letting people go - is an indispensable tool that must reside in the organization's arsenal. Tenure, as is well known, represents almost the precise opposite.

3.3. THE PRIMA BALLERINA EFFECT

By the prima ballerina effect (hereafter referred to as the primadonna effect), I mean the phenomenon of a multitude of stars (as in movie stars), of people with a true or perceived celebrity status - all part of the same institution. The primadonna phenomenon comes, of course, from the world of ballet. It is well known there that one treads lightly around those highly sensitive, overbearing, volatile personalities. In some ballet companies, they become the de-facto rulers, frequently quite tyrannical, of the group. However, in a ballet company the number of primadonnas is quite limited. Two to 4 is the number in most companies, usually with a pecking order among those as well. The very existence of primadonnas creates a fierce competitive environment, with strict rules - and a fairly well defined retirement criteria. The situation in the academic world is, to some extent, similar - and to a large measure decidedly worse. If we look at the collection of features defining the primadonna phenomenon, we'll see that the academic world has adopted some and rejected others, resulting in a very difficult combination.

Table 1: Academia vs. Ballet Company

Feature	Ballet Company	Academia
Number of primadonnas	2 - 4	Almost all faculty
Competition	Direct, focused	Subtle, diverse
Skills required to attain status	Well defined, mostly identical	Loosely defined, different across departments
Length of service	Relatively short	Very long
Retirement	After peak	65 - 70 and above
Termination	Possible	Almost impossible

The results of this comparison are quite obvious: management in academia has to contend with a large group of people, all of its members having a well developed ego, both professionally and personally, who can not be readily marched to a unified tune. Discipline is rarely a viable option, certainly once tenure has been attained. Thus, management by consensus is frequently the only method, but achieving a consensus across so many diverse groups is very difficult - and definitely very time consuming.

3.4. MANAGEMENT ROTATION

Management, in a university environment, is a problematic topic, for a number of reasons:

♦ Many faculty find managerial duties beneath them

♦ Management is frequently considered a distraction not a promotion

♦ Management selection is often by election, not prior experience

♦ Management is not a 'one way street' but a traffic circle

It is well known that in many departments management positions have to be forced on faculty members, as they find it demeaning, tedious, uninteresting and a source for incessant conflicts with their colleagues. They also know that it takes precious time from their favorite activity - research, and also from the time they can devote to interacting with students and colleagues. Thus, management is often relegated to those who are least able to decline - not necessarily those that are best qualified for the job.

The process by which deans and department heads in many institutions of higher education are instated lack some of the fundamental properties of management selection. No prior experience is mandatory, nor a gradual progression through the ranks. Instead, elections are held, with the prime condition for becoming a candidate is academic rank - often quite the quintessential evidence of incompatibility with the job requirements. Then, elections are as elections will be - the winner is not necessarily the best-qualified person, but the person that can garner enough support and form the strongest coalition. It is not uncommon that this coalition is aimed at blocking a candidate deemed undesirable by some faculty more than at ascertaining the welfare of the department.

Last but not least of the problems of the management selection process in institutions of higher education is that of the 'traffic circle' or job rotation as opposed to the one-way road common in other areas. This phrase denotes here the practice, found in many such institutions, that views management as a temporary duty, to be held for a relatively short period - followed by a return to the haven of regular faculty position where one is free to indulge in one's favorite activities and is not burdened by responsibilities for the over-all welfare of the unit.

All these, of course, contradict every tenet of proper management, and create many difficulties:

♦ Excellence in management not necessarily a consideration for the job.

♦ Learning curve maximized every time.

♦ Inability to lead and manage out of strength and personal conviction.

♦ Short terms of office, and thus rapid turnover of management personnel.

♦ Concern for future status among colleagues when rejoining the ranks.

♦ Lack of willingness to institute far-reaching reforms.

A notable exception to the election processes described above is found in some American universities, where deans are nominated, usually by the board of trustees, from outside the university - often from business or government - and they serve as full-time professional managers. While this improves their ability to function - in particular, it frees them from the problems listed above in this section - it still is not sufficient for over-all success with TQM.

4 TOTAL MANAGEMENT IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING - IS IT POSSIBLE?

Many academic institutions are governed by a system of dual control, a term describing the following management method: academic authority is vested in a rector or provost, while administrative responsibilities are only carried out by the general manager or president. This division of powers is, obviously, of little or no concern of the clients of the institution. These clients are never interested in the organizational structure or the authority divisions among the various arms of the service provider. The people that work inside the institution, on the other hand, are all too conscious of these constructs, and act in strict accordance with their perception of the power lines. Since in order for TQM to be implemented a total client view is mandatory, it is extremely difficult to create the internal structure, within the institution of higher education, which crosses all the organizational lines and moves freely between administration and academia. Clearly, TQM in a university setting must address issues of, advertising, admissions, student services in departmental offices, quality of teaching, quality of examinations, quality of research - among others - and some of these issues are clearly administrative, some are patently academic. Finding within the institution the psychological and organizational wherewithal to accomplish a common goal is quite a task. It may even happen that the goal, as seen by one party will be viewed as nothing short of a 'takeover' attempt by the other, suspecting that the whole idea is just another clever ploy in the eternal power struggle between these two groups.

Consequently, a total - or even a nearly comprehensive - management approach is, alas, usually beyond the realm of possibilities for many universities.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The problems described above lead to the conclusion that in the environment that is common in many institutions of higher education, TQM can not be properly applied. The implementation process of TQM would, of necessity, involve giving up many long-standing privileges, a most unlikely prospect, for a reasonably long period of time, in order to enable an agreed upon course of action to take hold and produce preliminary results. The chances of achieving a long-term spirit of cooperation - in practice, not just as lip service - among rivaling factions, departments and personalities, is minimal at best.

TQM can only be attempted after some restructuring of the universities, a restructuring that would involve a redistribution of power, a change in management practices and - above all - an agreement about the mission of these institutions. This redefinition of mission statement - and some would even argue that the 're' is really misplaced here. As most of the universities rely - partially or completely - on public financing - such a change must come about only after a long, careful and serious public debate, involving many forces, quite a few of them external to the university setting. Whether such a change in a system, which has been serving mankind for close to one thousand years, is warranted at all is a question beyond the scope of this paper.

REFERENCE

Peratec (1994), *Total Quality Management*, Chapman & Hall, London.