

The Psychology of Quality

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The following was written as a thought-provoking feed into a strategic corporate consulting process that utilised NLP and organisational psychology.

Say the word “Quality” to yourself and what do you feel? What do you hear or say to yourself? What do you hear? And what do you see? Spend a few moments saying the word “Quality” and just notice whatever you notice. Done that?

Well, the likelihood is that the average person will feel a little repulsed, will say “Must avoid! Must avoid!” to themselves twenty times, will hear the music from psycho in the background and will see the image of a much despised auditor rummaging mercilessly through their business... Familiar? If not it should be: If you work in the “Quality” world that’s the reality of how your clients may well really think.

In psychology this type of instant knee-jerk reaction can be referred to as an Archetype. My dictionary of psychology terms defines an archetype as *“(Carl Jung) Primordial images and symbols found in the collective unconscious, which - in contrast to the personal unconscious - gathers together and passes on the experiences of previous generations, preserving traces of humanity's evolutionary development over time”*.

Which means that years of conditioning have given the concept of “Quality” a really bad image to cope with. Let’s see, we had Total Quality (Total Boredom), BPRE (Be Prepared to Reconsider Employment) ISO-9001 (Sponsored by the Campaign to Eliminate Forests) and now ISO9001:2000 Update (Yawn, Zzzzzz). The standards may change over time but very little happens to how the concept of “Quality” is viewed.

One solution is to “reframe” the concept of Quality. According to my handy psych dictionary reframing is: *“a powerful change stratagem that seeks to change our perceptions, and this may then affect our actions.”* In other words an advertising blitz to reposition more or less the same old thing using different words: “Quality” becomes “Process or Business Improvement or Business Excellence”, “Non Conformances” become “Improvement Opportunities”, “Auditors” become “Process Analysts or Business Improvement Project Managers” and “Audits” become “Process Reviews” or “A very friendly quick chat over tea and scones: Do say if you need a reassuring hug.”

The possibly inevitable down-side to reframing is that human beings sooner or later generalise experiences. My now much thumbed dictionary defines generalisation as *“the putting together of similar things, by selectively ignoring their differences. For example, photocopiers are not the same as computers, but a model might usefully lump them together as OFFICE EQUIPMENT ITEM.”* This is the long term fate of most attempts to reframe: If the thing that you are attempting to reframe is not substantially and radically different it will be re-associated with the feelings / perceptions associated with the thing being reframed. How long did it take for the “New Labour” ads to lose their shine? How long will “ISO9001:2000” Update be seen as the best thing since sliced bread? <Not long I suspect!>

So, if changing the approach does not work and if reframing is ultimately self defeating what can be done?

Well, that really depends on the organisation, people that work in that organisation and just how lofty the objective or outcome is. If a company simply wants “Quality” staff to not be loathed and hated reframing may well hit the mark. If on the other hand their goal is for everyone to “buy-in fully to the underlying concepts and vocally support the pursuit of business excellence” there a strong possibility of long-term “failure”.

Another of my psych books has the following to say about “failure”. *“There is no such thing as failure, only feedback. When something doesn't go as we planned we tend to see that as failure. Depending on the seriousness of the situation we might then get angry, irritated, sad, depressed, worried, guilty or whatever. None of which serves any useful purpose. But what happens if we see the situation as feedback rather than failure. A real life demonstration of how not to do something? Instead of being wrong we've learned something. Instead of feeling bad we are free to form a new plan of action and try again”.*

OK, so if ISO9001 etc do not really work in the long run what can we learn from the experience? Why do they not work – what is the common factor shared by all of these programmes?

People. Punters. Resource units. The workforce. Human beings. People. “Quality” is not about flow charts, it's not about forms either, and it's certainly not about version control numbers. It's all about people and how people think and feel – at work and at home. If you want people to be responsible for “Quality” that where you need to start. With them. With their ways of thinking. With their feelings.

And therein lies the problem.... “Quality” is the responsibly of the “Quality department”. “It's not *my* personal problem, there's a Quality Manager that's employed to look after that” – Familiar? Well it should be – because that is how people really think when the ownership is externalised. Why? Because “Quality” or “Doing what I do well as possible” is a value – it is not a process. When ownership is externalised the “Quality” value plummets down the value system top 40, and stays there. Quality departments and auditors simply reinforce the external imposition of someone else's values onto their own.

“But we can't stop auditing! How preposterous! We can't operate without flow charts!” I hear you shout. Well, what would really happen if you did stop auditing? What would happen if you threw away your flow charts?

Lets take those one at a time: Lets suppose for a moment that you put your feet up and simply stop conducting audits. What would happen? In real terms managers would need to take greater personal responsibility for the smooth operation of their processes. It is also probable that all team members will still continue to work using that patterns of operating that work for them – either as individuals or as teams or as directed by managers. So, what would happen? Not much I suspect. People police themselves and others every moment of every day – **if** they buy into the underlying value of excellence – which is probable if the locus of control is internal.

Now lets suppose that you simply tear up your process flow charts and build a nice cosy fire. What would happen? For a start would anyone actually notice? Do you really think that that is how people work? No. People do follow processes – that’s what they do 9-5 – but what they do not do is follow process flow charts. They just do things in a way that works for them. This method of doing things may or may not resemble a process flow chart. The diagram is academic – the model that they have in their memories is the one that will be referred to. That’s what they will actually **do**.

“But how will they implement process improvement without an auditors assistance?” ...you scream. Take a moment to listen to what people say to each other in coffee rooms world wide. They moan. They whine. They are critical. They say “That’s not the way that that should be done. That’s the wrong approach. That’s not how I would do it. If I was managing that department I would do it ...” People are people and have a natural tendency to seek out the path of least resistance. But this spirit of flexibility is driven undercover when the ownership is not theirs and the value is externalised.

The same applies to those involved in internal auditing. They follow a process but with very little enthusiasm or motivation. They know only too well how they / quality are perceived but are in a no win situation. If they befriend their auditees they are unlikely to find or raise issues, but they are likely to fall foul of management and external auditors for not doing their job. Conversely if they do raise issues they will be viewed as mortal enemies by their auditees but at least will be on good terms with their direct management and their external auditors. When responsibility is taken on by managers **at all levels** the need for internal auditors vanishes. “But that would put me out of a job?” True. And that is perhaps the ultimate goal of anyone working in “Quality”.

As a psychotherapist my goal is to provide clients with tools to improve their life and enable them to live as fully functional, positive, self sustaining individuals. If therapy continues for years the client is not benefiting – they are probably dependant on therapy rather than being empowered by it. The role of the therapist is therefore to provide therapy for a little time as humanly possible and to then step aside and allow the client to take responsibility for his or her own destiny.

The current trend of having “Quality” departments and “Auditors” is perhaps co-dependent: People working in “Quality” need individuals to **not** follow standard ways of working. If they did follow standards there would be no point in auditing for example. In the same way individuals need “Quality departments” because that’s how they are motivated to follow standards because “Quality” is not high on their value system charts and besides - the responsibility is externalised. It’s not really their problem anyway. Managers need “Quality” to do the things that they find distasteful i.e. managing. How much better it is when someone else is responsible for the enforcement of management decisions...

So, to all the “Quality managers” out there I say this: Change to the latest standard – Yes. Reframe “Quality” – Yes. But then “Let your people free!” Give them the responsibility for doing the best that they can. Let them fashion their own models of working in their own formats – whatever works for them – whatever they feel comfortable with. Let the managers do what managers are supposed to do – listen, consult, reflect, motivate and direct – i.e. let you’re your managers **manage**.