

A New Paradigm: Quality of All Life

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Abstract

In large parts of the world we see that problems arise not from a lack of things but from too many things. But despite this clear proof of problems due to overconsumption, our current systems still urge us to consume more to create growth. However, there is only one planet Earth. Our growth based model is on the brink of endangering all life on this planet. One of the ways to get out of this mental block will be the replacement of quantity by quality.

This can be the starting point of a new era for quality, one that can have a world wide appeal to people as a means to safeguard and improve all life. In a previous paper (1) we have shown how “Quality of life” can be a very strong and motivating mission for any business. But the paradigm “Quality of All Life” as the mission of an organization is taking this notion one level further. It makes social responsibility an intrinsic and natural part of the business strategy.

Keywords

Social Responsibility, Future of Quality

1. Introduction

In the past, major problems in society were related to a lack of things. Typical examples are access to clean water and enough food. Of course these problems still exist today in many parts of the world. However, in developed countries (read Western countries) the most important problems are related to an excess of things. Our problem is no longer a lack of food but an excess of food. All international institutions that study health issues agree that obesity is our number one problem. Another example are the huge traffic jams that we see in all major cities in the world, even already in cities in developing countries.

An important consequence of this overconsumption is that the capacities of planet Earth are getting overstressed. This is leading to rapid changes in the environment and certain events occurring much more than predicted by previous models. In fact scientists currently claim that “stationarity”, the principle on which all of our risk calculations for natural disasters are based, is no longer valid (2). We are seeing planetary changes that are disrupting all long term predictions and these changes are created by humans.

In the developed countries we have successfully solved our problems of “not enough”. We did this by creating a growth economy that is fundamentally based on continuously increasing the quantity of what we produce. Basically it means we constantly need more people consuming more. We have been so successful that the solution to the original situation - a lack of things - is now creating the new problem: too many things. It is becoming clear that solving our current problems is in direct conflict with our current system. Freely quoting Einstein: “You cannot solve

the problems of tomorrow with the systems of yesterday”. The food industry wants to sell more food, car companies want to sell more cars. This is not going to help us solve obesity or traffic jams.

What we are seeing now is that the means, the system, has become the goal. We have based all of our social systems on continuous growth to such an extent that growth itself is now a more important target than the real needs of people. One could say that the economy was there for the people but that now the people are there for the economy. In fact, to counter our current so called crisis, some economists launch desperate appeals to people to spend money just for the sake of spending money and helping the system. There has never been more advertising than today trying to convince people that they really need that pink refrigerator. Or as one marketing manager once said: “a customer is someone with our money in his pockets”. How immoral can we get?

In the business environment the best proof of this change of goal and means is the use of the term “human resources”. It amazes me how quickly this term spread around the world as an indication for what used to be called “personnel department”. It is absolutely disgraceful to refer to people as resources but it shows how we have literally turned the goal into a means. The people are there for the system not the other way around.

2. The Role of Quality Management in a Quantity Driven System

Quality management has played an important role in developing and improving our quantity driven system. Thanks to quality management rejects and rework were reduced, production efficiency was increased, and all of this led to the possibility to produce more with less cost. One of the most important elements in this has been the economic definition of quality.

The decoupling of intrinsic value from economic quality is a very important and often underestimated factor. It is the essence of the alienation of quality management from quality. And in the same way it has separated the quality professional from the rest of the world. To people in general the word quality expresses an intrinsic value, a positive experience, a good feeling. That will contain an economic element (value for money) but the feeling, the experience will prevail. Increasing the quality of life is a fundamental drive of the human species. This drive even exceeds our own lifespan, setting goals for future generations: people want their children to have a better life than they had.

So one would expect that quality management is naturally supported by people in organisations. That this is not the case has to do with the focus on economic quality within quality management. If we are to gain the hearts and minds of the people in the organisation quality management should be more concerned about quality of life of the people. Now it is seen as just another way to reduce cost and to make people work harder to increase profit.

In view of the shift of the problem situation from “not enough” to “too much”, quality management will need to redefine its objective within a changed system. A shift from economic quality to intrinsic quality will be an important element of this change but it should go beyond

this: quality will need to replace quantity as the primary system driver. And in this new system quality of all life will need to be the final goal.

3. Quality of All Life: a Necessary New Paradigm and How to Get There

Changing systems is an extremely difficult task. Even when people are convinced that changes are needed it can still be difficult to get them out of the system box that they are thinking in. Moreover the negative consequences of our quantity based system are stretched over a long period of time. So there will always be doubt whether a fundamental change is really needed. On the other hand problems like obesity and traffic jams can no longer be ignored. In addition, there is an increasing decoupling between economic growth on the one hand and family income and employment on the other hand (3). As a result less and less people grasp the benefits of our current system and this can lead to social disruption forcing us to change systems. It is therefore absolutely necessary that we start thinking now about new sustainable systems for the future.

As already mentioned in paragraph 2, people work very hard to make sure their children will have a better life than they had. So far better has always been translated into more. Now is the time to change this and to call better really better. And this means we need to replace quantity by quality. Because contrary to quantity we can increase quality in a truly sustainable way. And we should do this for all life because all life is linked in one global system. Handing over this global system in a better state than it was received will be the most important task for current and new generations. It is also a very rewarding task.

Quality being the key word, quality professionals have a lot to offer in the development of this new thinking pattern. What is described above may seem like an enormous task but each one of us can add to the change in the right direction with small steps. These steps can be in our personal life, within our organisations (including quality organisations) and within society at large. In this article we will focus on changes that can be introduced in our organisations and on the role that quality professionals and quality organisations can play in society at large.

3.1. Changes within our companies

One of our most basic emotions is fear. This has long been recognised by marketing specialists who know that increasing fear is one of the most efficient ways to make people buy more. It is also the emotion that restrains us from implementing changes as we are more afraid of potential new dangers than the dangers that we are accustomed to. If we talk about introducing a new way of thinking within a company the biggest fear will be the loss of profit. But in order to achieve quality Dr Deming already told us to drive out fear (4).

In a presentation at the 58th EOQ Congress in Gothenburg, Sweden (1) I addressed the issue of quality of life as a strategic starting point for any business. I made it clear that focusing on the quality of life of customers and employees will help make companies more successful. Quality of all life takes this one step further: as an organisation we need to care about the planet.

In the past all of this has been seen as rather soft, philosophical ideas that have no bearing on real hard economic life. But in this age of social media where information travels freely and quickly it becomes more and more difficult for companies to see themselves as separated moneymaking units whose only social responsibility is to generate profit. Nothing is further from the truth. Just one recent example: profits of SeaWorld dropped by 84% after the documentary “Blackfish” was released. In this documentary a very critical view was given on the way orcas are treated within SeaWorld. Actually, in the near future people will no longer accept that such amazing animals are kept in small enclosures for our amusement and entertainment. If they are smart at Sea World they are already adapting strategy and products to this upcoming change.

The conclusion for any business should be clear: start taking social responsibility serious! Until now all too often social responsibility has been limited to some society good works with the aim of getting positive publicity. The world is seeing through this, and people will start recognising companies that are truly socially responsible. And just like quality of life is the starting point for a successful business, quality of all life will be the focal point for a sustained successful business.

Quality professionals can play an important role in the development of quality of life and social responsibility within their organisations. It is something that should naturally appeal to them. This is an element where quality becomes the goal rather than a tool. As already indicated in paragraph 2, focusing more on intrinsic quality compared to economic quality will appeal to people. More than anyone else in the organisation the quality manager should focus on changes that improve the quality of life of all involved. It is one way to use the intrinsic value of quality as a means to motivate people. It places the well-being of people and planet at the top of our ambitions. Organisations that do this will see profit automatically follow.

3.2. Changes in Quality Organizations

It always strikes me how little we hear from quality organisations when there are major problems occurring in society. Generally we will hear politicians, very often also economists or lawyers but extremely rarely quality specialists or engineers for that matter. One would expect large quality organisations to have at least an opinion on the things that happened.

For example: after the major financial crisis in 2007 - 2008 we heard a lot of economists explaining what had happened. Strangely enough they all knew but unfortunately only after the facts. Of course one cannot expect a quality organisation to understand what had happened in great technical detail. But I think that an organisation like ASQ for instance should be able to set up a task force of quality managers from the financial world to make a clear root cause analysis and to come up with some proposals for improvement of financial towards higher robustness in order to prevent this from happening in the future. If the quality world does not do that, with all its expertise on root cause analysis and system improvement, no one will. And no one has, because the current situation in the financial world has not changed one single bit so far (5).

Members of these organisations, by definition quality specialists, should press their organisations much more into being active in situations like this one. If quality is only about reducing defects and increasing productivity, it is not worth being called quality. We have to lift our speciality

beyond the boundaries of our organisations. And quality organisations are able to draw on the knowledge of so many quality specialists that they could have a much bigger influence than they currently have. But it will be up to the individual members of these organisations to push them in that direction.

3.3. Creating the New System

There is a growing number of people that realise that a fundamental change to the system will be needed. New systems are being developed, very often on a local small scale. This bottom-up movement is gaining momentum but will at some point in time need a more structured approach to increase its impact. That is where quality specialists could play a major part. After all, we are the ones that always say that in order to correct the situation you need to correct the system. That we should not blame people but improve the system.

This is an ideal moment to prove that we really mean what we say. That we are willing to think outside and beyond the current system box. And that we can apply our vast toolbox on a much larger scale than we are used to.

4. Conclusions

This should be the dawn of the age of Quality. As Quality professionals we always emphasize that in order to improve we need to fix the system. This is our moment to truly do exactly that: improve the big system.

5. References

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