

Let's Take Another Look at Quality

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Teaching both Organizational Behavior (OB) and Operations Management (OM) for over thirty years has created an awareness of a perceived disconnect regarding the treatment of quality by these two different management disciplines. OM has been a leader in the field of quality, however, those teaching OB have been less engaged in the topic. This article discusses the different perspectives held by OB and OM; presents a conceptual model for the consideration of OB professionals; and discusses how the model might lead to a greater understanding of the role quality could play in the classroom and the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

For over thirty years I have been in the unique position of teaching both Organizational Behavior (OB) and Operations Management (OM). These are often viewed within academia as two very disparate disciplines attended to by different academic animals. One group might be characterized as being sensitive, touchy-feely, and humanistic; with the other group better viewed as being analytical, objective, and mechanistic. This is obviously a brash overgeneralization; however, it is hard to deny that both groups do come to the party with some baggage. Two conclusions I have drawn through these years of observation are first of all, that quality plays a vital role in all types of businesses and OM professionals greatly appreciate this. Secondly, that OB professionals could, and perhaps should, make a significantly greater contribution in the area of quality than they are presently making by changing the way they approach the topic conceptually and deal with it in their textbooks, classrooms, and training grounds.

It may well be the case that a closer, more functional relationship between these two groups with regard to their treatment of quality would be of benefit to many. This piece will focus on the topic of quality; examine its importance for contemporary organizations; look at the regard, or lack thereof, with which each discipline holds quality; and propose a model for OB educators that might facilitate more and stronger quality behaviors in the workplace. This appears a worthwhile goal as both disciplines bear responsibility for the preparation of future leaders who will in turn be held responsible for organizational outcomes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY

Quality has long been recognized by operations managers as a driver for sales, profitability, and market share. A testament to their respect for the topic is reflected by the fact that it is common practice for OM textbooks to contain not one chapter on quality, but often two. One chapter will typically address the role that quality plays in the strategic and competitive considerations of the firm. The other chapter will deal with the technique of quality assurance covering such topics as statistical quality control, control

charts, six sigma programs, etc. An examination of OB textbooks reveals a different picture. In the field of OB, quality is seldom addressed with the exception of a few passing references to tangential topics such as quality of work life or quality circles. This disparity in coverage speaks volumes with regard to the relative importance of quality to the two groups. The fact that OB seems relatively indifferent to quality seems strange given that as much as eight percent of the economy is now tied to the service sector. This is a dramatic change from the third of the economy occupied by services a century ago and sixty percent some fifty years ago. If one considers the origins of quality in the service sector it would seem that it is largely impacted by the subjective interpretation of a customer's perception of an interpersonal encounter. In other words, in the service sector, behaviors determine quality. It seems time for a redefinition of quality that shadows this trend.

From a national perspective, quality can be a foundational concept that makes its way from the factory and becomes part of the cultural backbone. Nowhere might you find a better example than in Japan. We should never forget the contribution made almost 70 years ago by an educator by the name of J. Edwards Deming. His post-World War II lectures on the importance of quality were received by the Japanese people with such conviction that they would implant within the culture and become an ongoing and pervasive part of it. Awarding of the Deming Prize in Japan, the nation's top prize in recognition of quality, is still an event that garners rock star status. It's been said that most Japanese workers will stay after hours without pay to make repairs should bad units be returned to their work stations. The amazing thing is that they will do so not out of fear of reprisal or punishment, but because they feel it is the right thing to do. Do we hold quality in the same regard in the U.S.? Is this the cultural attitude that we reflect? These are questions worth asking.

At a more micro level, ongoing trends in the workplace might suggest that this lack of regard for quality shown by the OB community might be inappropriate and even viewed by some as a dereliction of duty. With the growth of the service sector we have witnessed the behavioralization of the workplace. When workers are making widgets, their behavioral skill package is somewhat irrelevant to the process. It doesn't matter if they are in a foul mood or are filled with anger and resentment. It also doesn't matter if their factory home is in an industrial park on the outskirts of town, an old red brick structure in the heart of the city, or a prefabricated building deep in the woods. The odds are that they are never going to see the customer that might be the future owner of their product. This can't be said for the growing service sector. The workers now often find themselves in immediate proximity to the customer or client. They are face to face, eye to eye, or at least ear to ear and that sour mood or lack of sincerity will now register as a strongly perceived negative in the eyes of the customer.

To cloud the picture even more, the measurement of quality has become much more complex. No longer are hard data available that might come from the post mortem of a sample of finished product, such as weight, length, height; now the measure needs to consider such elements as satisfaction, attitude, desire to please, or the ability to establish a connection that might foster an ongoing relationship.

The question becomes, how do we understand the drivers of quality? If by definition quality is something better than average, then what is the decision process through which people go as they portion out the energy and attention that they have to spend in a given day? What are ways in which a manager might construct a work environment that is more conducive to patterns of quality friendly behaviors? How might those behaviors present themselves and be acknowledged? Finally, how might consequences be employed that would modify negative behaviors and sustain the strength and frequency of the most desirable ones? The model proposed suggests an approach that examines essential preconditions, a variety of quality behaviors, and the role of sustaining consequences.

A BETTER DEFINITION FOR QUALITY

Managers and organizations need to adopt differing definitions of the term quality. In the historical development of quality there has been little if any mention of quality as a behavioral phenomenon nor much mention of the roles individual behavior, group behavior, or organizational support play in the achievement of quality. If any common thread unites the more popular definitions of quality today it is a

tendency to define quality exclusively in terms of characteristics of outcomes that have already occurred. If one wishes to have an optimum impact on quality, a more promising approach seems to be one which focuses on antecedents instead of outcomes and therefore prevention instead of detection. A behavioral framework for quality should rest on a definition recognizing quality as a dynamic behavioral process instead of a finished product. With this viewpoint adopted, the relevance of the OB body of knowledge becomes more obvious and the potential for an increased contribution is greatly expanded.

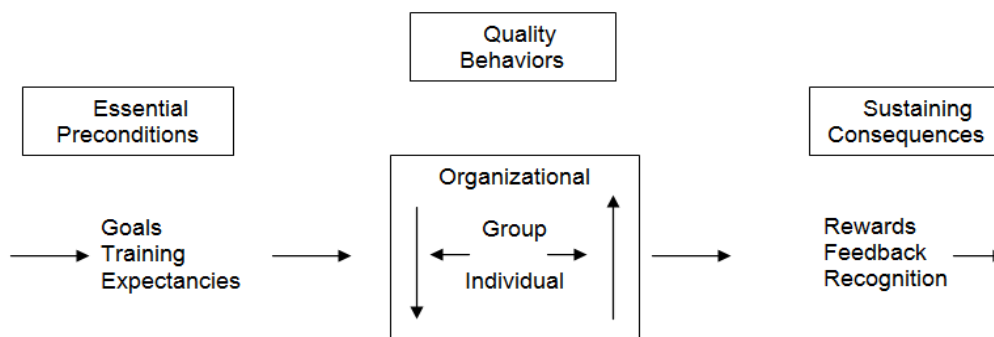
In the study of organizational behavior, considerable attention is given to the mechanics by which behavioral processes occur - for example: what makes people motivated or satisfied; what gives rise to conflict; or how is communication effectiveness enhanced? In fact, the explicit goal of the study of OB as stated by Fred Luthans, a leader for years in the writing of OB texts, is to understand, predict, and control such behaviors in contemporary organizations. Quality as described above, seems like a natural for increased inclusion and development in the mainstream OB body of knowledge.

To further appreciate the goodness of fit between quality and OB, take a look at Webster's rather lengthy definition of quality. One finds it replete with superlatives such as excellent, fine, high grade, superior, and distinguished—all of which underscore quality as something above average. The implication is that in most cases an individual or a group within an organization must put forth an effort in excess of the norm in order to achieve quality, regardless of the capacity in which they are making a contribution, be it services or manufacturing. It is the extra attention given to a shipment of materials by a receiving inspector; it is the added effort a production worker expends to make sure an assembly is put together just right; it is the few more minutes a worker takes to reassure an anxious patron; or it is the last test that a team of design engineers conduct before calling a new design complete. As defined to fit within the proposed behavioral framework, quality is created through the interaction of people with their jobs and with other people. It is the fruit of a behavioral process. As such, it seems a worthy candidate for increased attention by educators, researchers, and writers in the field of OB.

TOWARD A BEHAVIORAL FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY

A behavioral framework for quality requires more than changing the definition of the term, though this is an essential first step. It also requires more than the focus of attention, or the assignment of blame, on the actions of individuals. It requires the construction of a supporting structure that serves to organize our thoughts about the topic and to facilitate integration of existing knowledge. The framework proposed in this article is simple and builds upon operant conditioning and learning theory. The general dimensions of this framework are discussed first, followed by a discussion of the framework's operationalization.

FIGURE 1
Behavioral Framework for Quality



Essential Preconditions

The overarching structure of the model calls first for the creation of certain essential preconditions. A focus on quality may not be a given in all organizational cultures so foundational work may need to be done in this area. It is therefore the responsibility of management to tell the quality story and let employees know what part they must play in it. Quality must be explicit in the statement of goals and objectives. It should be a facet of performance assessed and discussed at each performance review. Everyone should know the targets for which they should aim and be aware of how close they are to hitting the mark.

If employees don't have the skills that are necessary for quality goal achievement, then training becomes essential. It is one thing to know what needs to be done - it is a totally different thing to know how to do it. Not everyone is adept at effective listening, accurate reflection, verbal engagement, or whatever skills are paramount in a given organization for example. For some, these skills need to be trained and nurtured. The burden that falls on the training staff may be somewhat mitigated through careful selection in the first place. The implication here calls for better selection instruments that will paint an accurate picture of potential employee aptitudes as well as abilities with regard to behaviors of specific interest to the organization.

Finally, the organization through their managers must foster clear and explicit expectations as to how jobs will be done and employees will perform. If the goals are properly set and the training has been sharp and well executed, then employees are more likely to develop positive performance expectations. They should envision being able to work in such a way that success is not just possible, but probable. Confidence or self-efficacy should become a more common characteristic of the workforce.

Quality Behaviors

Now that the stage is set, it is time for the quality behaviors to occur. Just as many OB classes and textbooks progress from a focus on the individual—to the group—to the organization, so might the topic of quality be approached conceptually and pragmatically. First of all it should be noted that the model recognizes the dynamics arising from these different levels of aggregation. This hierarchical perspective promotes the recognition that individual and group quality behaviors occur not in isolation from one another but together and within a cultural context provided by the organization. Organizational culture sets the stage for the employee expectations to occur. Just as in good stagecraft, if the lighting is good, the actors can better see where to go. If the scenery is appropriate than the story line is supported. And, if the acoustics are right then all the groups and individuals involved can clearly hear the message the author wishes to convey.

That message will be different for different organizations as the ever widening circle of services available expands. Accuracy and attention to detail may be paramount in some organizations where creativity or entertainment value or technical support may be the central theme elsewhere. A keen awareness of customer expectations in a context of competitive options may provide a guiding light to keep a company focused on the appropriate target.

Sustaining Consequences

It is human nature that people will do what they are rewarded for doing. The strong suggestion here is to study reward systems to ensure that rewards are in fact triggered by events that are worthy of reward. Is meeting one's quota reward worthy or is meeting one's quota of quality units the standard employed? The difference may seem trivial but only one of the two practices gives any credence to the importance of quality. Is time on the job the criteria for promotion, or is it the recognition of quality driving behaviors like consistent customer focus and attention that serves as the promotion activator.

Another assessment might involve an examination of your organization's star performers. What did they do to deserve their status as a star? How big a role did quality related behaviors play in their selection? In what regard are the corporate elite held by the other employees? If quality does not play a major role in this analysis, then the system may be flawed. If the employees do not share management's

respect for the star, of what ongoing value is this celebrity? Hopefully the person identified and the behaviors modeled will be a guide for all to follow.

What are the actual rewards that you are providing? The law of diminishing returns is said to apply to monetary rewards. As people make more money, the desirability of an additional unit of money tends to decrease over time as an economic satiation occurs. Public acknowledgement, praise, and recognition are things with which most people do not satiate. When was the last time you heard someone complain about receiving too much positive praise or recognition? The manager who is quick to praise an employee caught in the act of doing something positive with regard to quality, is probably going in the right direction. Do not read this, however, as recommending an overly zealous explosion of indiscriminate positive regard as this may cause problems. If the managers' praise is seen by the employees as being undeserved or insincere, employees will view it as being exploitative and manipulative and the practice will likely do more harm than good.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Once this framework is in place, the integration of relevant OB concepts both conceptually and in the classroom and workplace is facilitated. It is then incumbent on us as teachers and managers to encourage the students and workers to go one step further in their mastery of the concepts we teach and take the theories to the point of application relative to quality. For example, when presenting expectancy theory to a group of management students, talk about how to foster expectancies, instrumentalities, and valences impacting on quality. In discussing perceptual dynamics, talk about the increased role perception will play in customer evaluations and performance appraisal in the expanding service sector. Instead of talking about reinforcement theory and job design in generic terms, talk about them as instruments to improve and support specific quality behaviors. Instead of teaching isolated skills in training and orientation, make sure to convey how the skills are associated with customer satisfaction and quality outcomes.

OB professionals should not hesitate to provide linkages between behavioral theories and quality for fear of cheapening the intellectual experience. After all, their job is to provide future managers with tools they can use in their struggle with complex and dynamic problems. Though academicians may have limited opportunities to make the transition from theory to practice, the students they teach will have ample opportunity. They should be able to look to the field for leadership in the area of quality. OB professionals should be the ones offering the answers to the quality riddle.

Here in summary are some of the most relevant questions that every CEO should be asking of their organizations and every OB professional should be pondering as well.

- **Does quality play a prominent role in your corporate culture?
- **Is quality referenced in your mission statement?
- **Can you identify high quality potential employees with your selection process?
- **Do you have a development and training program for those not consistently meeting quality standards?
- **Are there any disconnects between individual, group, and organizational quality goals?
- **Are group norms in place that drive individual quality performance decisions?
- **Can you clearly identify your organization's quality stars?
- **Are these quality stars held in high regard by a majority of your workers?
- **Is quality a topic at each performance review session?

If the answer to these questions is not yes, then perhaps you better take another look at quality.