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Quality: key to survival in the next millennium

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There can be a few current business or industrial topics, which warrant the word survival as the measure of their importance. We face rapid changes in social values, people's aspirations, technology, and products and above all in customer expectations. Organisations to survive in a rapidly changing environment need to differ from traditional management approaches. The focus on quality becomes a key factor for survival in a very competitive market.

Thirty years ago Japanese products had an international reputation for shoddy mimicry. Japanese cars, radios and other household and industrial goods were modelled on American and European products but had many failures. Today Japan has a well-deserved reputation for delighting the customer with excellence. Japanese employees are among the highest paid in the world, their managers are very efficient, effective, and their factories employ the latest technologies and set standards for other nations.

Quality and more specifically, are elevating the management of quality to the highest priority in the industry and in service.

What gives quality such importance? Make goods or provide services, which consistently delight customers, your business reputation soar and you, will attract customers from your competitors. You will have high moral, higher productivity and a pleasing work environment. Commitment to quality can change your business to a more profitable, viable unit which can survive the competitive markets of the next millennium.

The concept of quality has grown a long way since the early definitions of quality, such as, producing output in conformance to customer requirement. Quality is fitness for purpose. It is conformance to requirements. Quality reflects customer's acceptance criteria. It indicates grade of product or service. It signifies reliability and main-

tainability and expresses suitability for intended purpose.

The first generation of definition on quality relied on producing an output in conformance with customer requirements. The second generation of concept of quality was based on do it right first times and to output wasted effort making non-confirming output. The third generation improved on this and introduced the need to output the effort wasted on unnecessary activities. Today the quality is viewed as an effort to improve responsiveness to customer requirements by adding a new product development cycle and choice of features to produce customised products. This is focused on reducing costs, increasing sales, increasing customer loyalty, increasing competitiveness and increasing profitability. Hence today quality focuses on twin objectives of improving product responsiveness and the efficiency of the product development process.

One relatively narrow meaning of quality is that it refers to the degree to which a specific product or service meets the expectations of a specific person. A custom-made suit, a portrait, a handmade pair of shoes and a high-performance racing car are all examples of, products in which quality reflects an implicit agreement between a manufacturer and an end user.

Here, "fitness for use" for the intended purpose is the preferred meaning of quality. This definition, however, reflects the era of craftsmanship in a pre industrialisation period. By a stretching of the imagination, this definition can be forced to apply today but they would be worse than fitting a square peg into a round hole.

The biggest problem in defining quality arises when an attempt is made to apply the word to different products, such as Mercedes-Benz and Chevrolet automobiles. Does a Mercedes have better quality than a Chevy? If you answer yes, then you are considering socially generated quality characteristics and reflecting a non informed point of view. If you answer no, then you are properly regarding accepted determinants of quality, such as grade, conformance to design, suitability for intended

purpose and so forth. Clearly, it is better in this case to refuse to answer at all.

Certainly if a product does not service its intended purpose, then it has poor quality and this notion can be extended systematically to service organisations and other forms of commerce. In addition to basic service or service ability, many persons prefer and also expect additional benefits that are commonly associated with quality. "Quality of service" is usually not anticipated from a bureaucratic clerk, but it is expected from your personal banker.

Quality is regarded as the degree to which a product or service serves its intended purpose, recognising four key parameters: Quality of grade, quality of conformance to design objectives. Quality of availability and Quality of customer service. Each parameter reflects a particular aspect of the "intended purpose" and anticipates the dynamic nature of the quality function. Products and services are diverse in scope and in utilisation. Some products are expendable and others are durable: services can be temporary or long lasting; some products deteriorate with age and others do not. Guarantees vary with regard to availability, reliability and maintainability.

Quality is defined as the totality of attributes of a product or service that reflect on its innate capacity to satisfy a given set of needs. As a complete definition, this form may be lacking because quality means different things to different people. Because quality, as a concept, must survive in a climate of change, it has organisational implications at each stage in the life cycle of a product or service. Several definitions of quality are discussed below.

Quality is viewed as a quantifiable or measurable characteristic or attribute. For example, durability or reliability can be measured (e.g. mean time between failure, fit and finish) and the engineer can design to that benchmark. Quality is determined objectively. Although this approach has many benefits, it has limitations as well. Where quality is based on individual taste or preference, the benchmark for measurement may be misleading.

(To be continued)