

Going through the motions, but still off target in pursuit of operational excellence?

By Paul Baker and Bill Franch



There was a story that used to circulate about a major railway accident involving two trains colliding head-on in America sometime in the early 1900s. It was largely believed that a delinquent station signal operator who was also known as the town drunk caused the incident through dereliction of duty. The signal operator was brought to court to face charges. The case proceeded normally and finally the day arrived for the defendant to take the stand. The able prosecutor walked the signal operator through each event on the night of the accident in an effort to expose any neglect in the exercise of his duties. For example, did he receive the radio messages from the two approaching trains, did he send an acknowledgement transmission back to both trains, did he record this in the logbooks, etc.? Then the prosecutor asked the defendant to pick the appropriate colored lantern from a table and demonstrate for the jury the trackside signals he performed for each approaching train, which if done properly would have alerted the first train to safely pull into a siding and allowed the second train to pass. The signal operator's demonstration to the jury was flawless and he was acquitted later that day on all charges. After the verdict was read, someone in the courtroom overheard the jubilant defendant

exclaiming to his defense attorney that he had worried the prosecutor was going to ask him if the lantern had been lit! Do you ever have the feeling that you are going through all the correct motions for an effective quality program, but the lantern is not lit?

The quality revolution in the manufacturing and service businesses has gone through monumental changes in our lifetime - from resistance, to acceptance, to wide-spread implementation, to general acceptance as a prerequisite for doing business. However, it is our perception that something may have been forgotten as we often assume that an organization with ISO certifications, formal improvement programs, data tracking and the like must be at an effective and robust level. How do we recapture the underlying principles of Quality to bring renewed focus and purpose to our implementation efforts? What are the incentives and rewards for this approach? Through a series of articles, it is our hope to bring a fresh perspective and purpose to these activities in order to keep the lantern lit.

When we swerved into the quality field almost 3.5 decades ago, we found a profession that was largely a reactive endeavor at the end of the process. The Quality Control function was a necessary evil in order to filter or rework unacceptable product before it reached the customer. For example, the U.S.-made cars that were rolling off the assembly lines at the time were noted for their shoddy materials and poor craftsmanship. Inferior paint finishes, cheap plastic interiors that degraded rapidly with only limited exposure to sun, and constant oil/coolant leaks were the rule of the day.

About the same time, we began to notice friends or family members that recently purchased imported vehicles from Japan. Not only were they attractive-looking cars, they also came equipped with standard features like powered windows and AM/FM stereos that were expensive options on their domestic counterparts. In addition, the cars arriving from Japan came with great gas mileage and unsurpassed reliability. How could this be? It was widely recognized at that time that "quality" was part of the answer.

As American businesses were beginning to accept and confront this product quality gap that had opened between the U.S. and Japan, we attended seminars watching and listening with great interest. What was especially fascinating was the number of organizations that threw themselves straight into quality deployment and improvement activities through "Quality Circles" originally developed in Japan by Professor Kaoru Ishikawa in 1960. By the end of 1978, there were 7 million workers in Japan that participated in Quality Circle programs and over 10 million cumulative projects completed since the inception of the program.¹ These Japanese Quality Circles caught the attention of the U.S. manufacturing management like a

¹ J.M. Juran and Frank M. Gryna Jr., Quality Planning and Analysis, (McGraw-Hill Book Company, Second Edition, 1980), p.160.

storm in the early 1980's and was largely believed to explain how the Japanese were providing such great products.

Many well-published experts, consultants, and professional organizations got behind this and launched these Quality Circle teams full-throttle. We were surprised to see this large-scale effort implemented across multiple manufacturing industries so quickly. With unprecedented zeal, American manufacturing management started the practice of gathering a group of employees on a regular basis to analyze and solve work-related and/or product-related problems. Not surprisingly, articles soon began to appear describing the lack of results and discipline within the US led Quality Circles, often resulting in a huge waste of time and effort. This negative press received far too much attention, as there were some very promising and genuine results within large organizations like Xerox, Motorola, Caterpillar and Hewlett Packard. Despite the later shortcomings, the fledging efforts of the early Quality Circles were quite monumental in breaking down the barriers between departments, empowering employees, and fostering the notion that everyone within an organization owns quality.

The term "Quality Circle" quietly disappeared from the business lexicon in the late 1980s, being replaced by Total Quality Management. However, the fundamental concepts of quality circles still remain very solid and, in fact, are commonly practiced today through Kaizen events. The notions involve listening to the voice of the customer (both internal and external), making data-driven decisions, involving top management and assembling the right team with a vested interest in the product or service under improvement. The ultimate demise of the Quality Circles was most likely related to poor facilitation, blurred focus and being the "fad du jour." The Kaizen process adds many of the disciplines and elements that were missing from the earlier Quality Circles.

As the signal operator was able to go through all the correct actions and yet neglect the essential element of actually lighting the lantern, it easy to implement various improvement programs and overlook the obvious intention and purpose. Despite execution shortcomings, Quality Circles brought forward key sound principles and practices of customer focus, corporate-wide responsibility for quality and the importance of involving all the key participants for a given product or service.

Is your organization suffering from loss of focus and purpose in its' improvement efforts? Feel to contact us with your concerns or questions and please look for the next article in the series.

About the authors:

Over the last 30 years, Paul Baker has been a solutions-driven manufacturing business executive developing positive and long-lasting multimillion-dollar customer relationships by creating differentiating value through quality, delivery, technology, and time-to-market initiatives across multiple sites and global markets.

In addition, he has been a corporate instructor for Lean Enterprise, SPC, Six Sigma, and Program Management. He is a certified Lean Six Sigma Black Belt through Villanova University. Paul is the Managing Director of Global Business Consulting, LLC, at www.global-businessconsulting.com.

During the last 30 years, Bill Franch has been a solutions-driven business leader with years of success producing breakthrough results for large businesses engaged in numerous product technologies. He is a business strategy specialist and lean six sigma expert, delivering best-in-class performance in EBIT, order fulfillment, cost reduction, and quality across regional sites and global markets. Consistently a top performer and recipient of many honors, including the Shingo Prize and Industry Week's America's Best Plants awards, Bill is currently the Managing Director of Performance Resource Partners, LLC, at www.performanceRP.com.