

By Michael H. Cook, Editor

"Quality Circles—They Really Work, But..."

Statistics show that more than 75 percent of solutions presented to management by quality circle groups in the United States have been implemented.¹

In the past year alone, we have seen a multitude of consulting organizations and resource groups popping up across the country, offering everything from inexpensive packaged programs to complete, in-house seminars designed to train facilitators to introduce and implement quality circles in their organizations.

The quality circle concept has been implemented with some degree of success in companies such as: Ford Motor Co., Honeywell, General Motors, General Electric, Westinghouse, Bank of America, 3M Co., Eaton Corp. and hundreds of others. Current interest in the concept is prevalent in service-types of organizations, including banks, hospitals, insurance companies, etc.

Both the public and trade press have been quick to point out these organizations' successes by implementing this "savior" of American industry. They really haven't, however, given much ink to the problems that have or can occur as a result of quality circle implementation.

The people at Consulting Associates, Inc., one of the many

resource groups actively involved in helping organizations initiate the QC process, claim that nearly one-third of all quality circles in this country fail!

What they fail to realize

Many top managers read about the tremendous successes some organizations have achieved with quality circles, and they immediately want to "jump on the bandwagon" in an effort to raise corporate productivity levels. These managers implement one or two circles, which get off to a "roaring" start, only to end up "fizzling out" because management has not been properly prepared on the concept or on decision making.

These managers fail to realize that implementing quality circles in an organization involves a major organizational development effort, complete with changes in power and authority, employee roles, etc. And, as is characteristic of any organizational change effort, what works in some areas or organizations will not work in others!

Middle management provides the greatest "stumbling block" to implementing effective quality circles. Shifts of power and authority in the decision making/problem-solving processes can pose a threat to middle managers. If this area of



management is not involved, they may not support the project or, in some cases, they may even undermine it. Management, at both top and middle levels, must actively support the QC concept, or a drop in group morale or motivation will cause it to die.

Another problem area centers around the American tendency to cut the QC process short, in many cases, by eliminating the formal presentation by the *total* group to top management, where a final decision on the problem can be made. Many organizations stop the process at the *supervisory* level, which may create additional problems.

Lack of QC awareness

In the United States, organizations using quality circles tend to select a supervisor for the group, instead of letting the circle select a leader from within its structure (and from all employee levels). This can also create problems, depending on the attitude and leadership qualities of that supervisor. There is a tendency in many circles, resulting from a lack of preparation in group dynamics and communications skills, for the supervisor to "sway" the decision making process of the group. Thus, the original, participative-management principles and motivational factors that form

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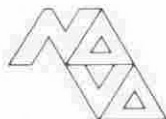


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the basis of an effective quality circle are lost!

Many supervisors lack the skills and/or training for meeting planning and effective group leadership, and in most cases, they are not knowledgeable in these areas *before* they are assigned to lead a circle. This lack of preparedness can lead or contribute to the failure of the concept! On the other hand, too much emphasis in training circle members in other areas can also lead to a circle's demise.

In some organizations, circle members are exposed to a great deal of "nuts and bolts" information and are not taught how to *organize a project* (i.e., assigning roles, developing agendas, etc.). In other organizations, circle member training focuses on how to conduct a meeting, etc. But, teaching circle members these types of skills without teaching them statistical methods, data gathering and analysis techniques, etc., allows the group to solve only superficial problems.

Let's hear from you!

Obviously, I have mentioned only a few of the problems that can result while implementing quality circles. And by no means do I intend to demean the concept by pointing out these pitfalls. My intention is to simply create an awareness of these problems for those of you considering introducing quality circles into your organizations. If those of you currently using them would like to share your successes *and*, of course, the problems you have experienced in implementing the concept, please drop me a note...We want to share this information with our readers in a future issue!