

VERY FEW OF US EVER EXPECTED SO SIMPLE
A TRAINING PROGRAM TO TAKE THE COUNTRY BY STORM!

QUALITY CIRCLE: A TOOL FOR THE '80s

BY ED YAGER

One of the most fascinating movements of the past few explosive years in management/employee and organization development has been the incredible growth of the Quality Circle (although originally known as Quality Control Circles, more and more U.S. organizations are dropping the word "control," feeling a negative connotation).

The Quality Circle movement came into this country in the early '70s, having become a way of life in industrialized Japan. Nearly one-quarter of all Japanese hourly employees are members of a voluntary Quality Circle. It received particular emphasis and attention during the 1980 drop in United States automobile sales with the overwhelming growth of the Japanese competition being attributed primarily to the higher quality of the Japanese product.

Although the results are not 100 percent guaran-

teed, the overwhelming success of the technique must be noted. However, the successes should surprise no one familiar with behavioral science concepts. Perhaps the success of the technique can be seen in the simple fact that the process is based on sound, proven concepts. So far as the manager is concerned, a Quality Circle is just a technique for doing the job. So many agonizing years have been spent teaching managers about the behavioral sciences with so few attempts at actual application that change has been slow to come. Although it may be true all those years were schoolmaster years — preparing the industrial world for what was to come, few of us expected so simple a program to take the country so by storm. (But then — on a philosophical note quite unlikely — hasn't this been repeated over and over again throughout the history of humanity?)

The following concepts are soundly developed in a Quality Circle.

BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE CONCEPT

- Management must be committed to a change effort and all involved in the change must be involved in its initiation.

QUALITY CIRCLE APPLICATION

- A Quality Circle effort is initiated only upon the decision of senior management.
- Initial meetings for a Quality Circle are held with all union management and supervisory personnel.
- Participation in the Circle is voluntary.
- The managers who decide to try a Circle then have presentations to the hourly workers and, again, participation of the hourly worker is voluntary.
- Participation of management in the Circle is voluntary.

BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE CONCEPT

- People should have control in deciding about or changing work elements close to them.
- Individuals should not be coerced to change.
- Work should have intrinsic motivation and be enriching.
- Any change effort should be monitored and measured for impact.
- Workers need opportunities to meet higher motivational needs through the job.
- Managers will be more effective as they work toward developing a team or consensus style of leadership.
- Jobs need feedback to be reinforcing.

There are a number of questions that are commonly asked about Quality Circles when presentations are made to management to discuss the concept. These include, for example, the following:

Where are the failures?

Though infrequent and usually related to too fast or improper installation, failures do occur. This is not a program to be bought and plugged in. It is a serious intervention and needs careful and professional planning. It is not just another rehash of old participative management techniques.

How much does it cost?

QUALITY CIRCLE APPLICATION

- Circles are made up of workers with a common area of interest and intervention. Changes have to do with the work that each person does daily.
- Only the most advanced Circles work on interdepartmental issues. No Circle works on management problems (this is a fault in many "participatory" management efforts; i.e., workers are brought up to higher levels of decision making than they are prepared or equipped to handle and problems that they must deal with on a daily basis are not resolved).
- Participation in a Circle is voluntary and participants work on problems they decide need to be worked on in their own priority order.
- New skills regarding problem solving, statistics and measurement are taught to Circle members which enrich their lives and are seen as interesting.
- Because a Quality Circle is primarily concerned with measurement — all change is monitored and measured constantly. The major efforts of a Circle involve measuring current performance, initiating or constructing change and measuring results.
- The intrinsic value of seeing change and improvement, coupled with the regular management presentation, gives visibility and exposure and ownership of results that few other change interventions allow.
- The time off the job for the Circle to meet provides its own brand of recognition. So does the social need that members address with each other. The manager or supervisor who has long been told to develop people now has something to do to develop people (development has always been so abstract a concept when given the context of the need to get the job done).
- Although possible, it is difficult for a manager to be domineering in a Circle because of the training that Circle members and leaders receive. There is also a greater focus on various creativity/brainstorming or measurement techniques instead of an authority-based leadership. A Circle leader is cast in a "9/9" role without really knowing it — or without consciously trying to alter his or her attitude or behavior.
- A QC Circle is a feedback device. It is built on the basis of feedback and measurement.

Typically, the first Circle will be operating within weeks after installation begins and it will cost between \$8,000 to \$15,000 to launch using an outside consultant. Additional Circles are added internally with little additional cost.

What is the return?

Typically, a six to 10 divided by one return can be anticipated. Many Circles have returned thousands of dollars within the first few weeks of operation.

How soon will a Circle be contributing?

Sometime within the first few weeks. Generally, it will take six to eight weeks before the Circle is mak-

WHAT IS A QUALITY CIRCLE?

A Quality Circle is a voluntary group of workers who have a shared area of responsibility. They meet together weekly to discuss, analyze and propose solutions to quality problems. They are taught group communication process, quality strategies, and measurement and problem-analysis techniques. They are encouraged to draw on the resources of the company's management and technical personnel to help them solve problems. In fact, they take over the responsibility for solving quality problems, and they generate and evaluate their own feedback. In this way, they are also responsible for the quality of communications. The supervisor becomes the leader in the circle and is trained to work as a group member and not as a

"boss."

A Quality Circle is a small group of employees doing similar work who voluntarily meet for an hour each week to discuss their quality problems, investigate causes, recommend solutions and take corrective actions.

A circle is primarily a normal work crew — a group of people who work together to produce a part of a product or service.

Circle leaders go through training in leadership skills, adult learning techniques, motivation and communication techniques. The Quality Circle itself is trained in the use of various measurement techniques and quality strategies, including cause and effect diagrams, pareto diagrams, histograms and various types of

check sheets and graphs. More advanced circles move on in their training to learn sampling, data collection, data arrangement, control charts, stratification, scatter diagrams and other techniques.

A typical Quality Circle includes five to 10 members. If the department requires more than one circle, then a second leader is trained, and a second circle is formed. The circles then call on technical experts to assist in solving problems.

Circle meetings are held on company time and on company premises. Where companies have unions, the union members and leaders are encouraged to take an active role in the circle, to attend leader training and to become fully aware of circle principles.

ing sound recommendations.

Doesn't a Circle undermine the supervisory and staff department authority?

On the contrary. It casts the staff and the supervisor in a support and research role rather than in the historic adversary or superior role. They gain new levels of authority by virtue of their expertise rather than by virtue of edict or position.

Aren't Circles apparently limited to assembly or manufacturing operations?

Not at all — in fact, more and more banks, hospitals, retail stores and service organizations are beginning Circles. Different measurement techniques sometimes apply, and sometimes incentives need to be clarified, but the success in many ways is even more impressive than those found in many industrial units.

Circles are for big companies, aren't they?

Although many firms like Lockheed, RCA, GE, GM, Martin-Marietta, Westinghouse, AMF and others have been the first to move into the field, it is clear that even the very smallest organizations have much more to gain. A 10 percent improvement in productivity for a million-dollar company (which is barely just over the break-even), is a much more significant gain in the profit column than the activities of a single Circle might be in a very giant company. Although it may take a little longer to pay back the original investment, the long-run return will be much more impressive.

In summary, it is quite clear to us as we've had the opportunity to meet with management and to install Quality Circles in a number of firms, that the behavioral science concepts that underlie the installation are soundly applied and it has not surprised us at all that the effect of the Quality Circle has been so great. It has been noted by some of the social scientists and behavioral scientist writers that the Japanese visited the United States during the '50s in order to study our concepts of management and quality control and, upon returning to Japan, implemented them with great success.

For some reason, U.S. managers were able to communicate to them the ideas that they had but have never fully implemented within this country due to resistance of unions, workers, and longstanding tradition. As a result, we find the concepts with regard to employee participation and quality control well developed but their application lagging two decades behind while the Japanese took the concepts and applied them immediately with resounding success. We now find ourselves looking to their successes and trying desperately to catch up with our own concepts.

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