

Title: Basic Skills in the Total Quality Workplace (An organizational focus)

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Adult educators are facing many new challenges in the design and delivery of workplace education programs. Companies, anxious to obtain a competitive edge, have moved from introspection to action. Not only has machinery and technology changes, so has the way in which companies are organized, positions staffed and workers evaluated. Upgrading in the workplace, whether in trade and technical competencies, or in basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, can no longer be viewed from an education perspective alone. An organizational focus on education and training has become an imperative.

Obtaining a detailed understanding of the new management and organizational philosophies recently introduced into North American workplaces is no simple task, either for trainers housed within corporations or those invited in from the outside, such as adult educators. Yet such understanding is required to propel training design and curriculum development into the 21 century. How will the changing world of business administration and organization affect education service providers in their outreach to workers?

The Total Quality Context

Total Quality Management is transforming many North American workplaces. The worlds of business and labour are abuzz with new ideas, ranging from use of statistical tools to team building to a focus on the needs of the customer. Many companies have established in-depth training in the area of Total Quality, either hiring consultants or developing an in-house expertise. This training tends to emphasize three major areas:

1. Understanding TQM as a philosophy;
2. Building teamwork skills on lateral rather than a hierarchal basis;
3. Explanation and use of the Process Improvement tools of TQM, sometimes referred to as "The Seven Statistical Tools" and the "New Seven".

What sometimes gets lost in the shuffle in basic skills training, the necessary precursor of the more in-depth training done in the area of TQM. More often than not, the trainers who join corporations to provide TQM training are experts either in the area of management, communications, or statistics. These trainers have also usually had little exposure to the world of basic skills. The provision of literacy and numeracy training in the workplace continues to be handled for the most part by adult education professionals from community colleges, secondary schools or social service organizations. Adult educators have developed a wide range of techniques and approaches to literacy instruction in the workplace. Many adult educators, however, have now reached a crossroads. They are now hearing about Total Quality in the workplace but often they do not have enough knowledge about it to ensure that their own programs are consistent with the Total Quality dynamic.

Even if many adult educators are already delivering basic skills programs in Statistical Process Control or Team Building, they may fall into any number of traps if they are doing so without first understanding the dynamics of the Total Quality philosophy. If corporate leadership senses that adult educators operate in as TQ vacuum, they may think twice about inviting them in to provide basic skills training. If needed trainers are invited in less frequently, they may not even understand that the reason lies with their own lack of understanding of what is needed for "transformation" in the workplace.

A good place to start in understanding the TQ philosophy is with Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the American statistician widely credited with transforming Japan from a manufacturer of cheap toys to a world class giant best known for manufacturing high class goods and satisfying customers. Along with another American colleague, Dr. Joseph Juran, Dr. Deming introduced into post-war Japan and later into North America, the concept of "continuous improvement" of processes and services. Based on a combination of statistics and psychology, and a "systems" approach to management and production, the concept of "continuous improvement" became the backbone of what was later referred to as the Total Quality philosophy.

Dr. Deming's philosophy is summed up in his 14 Points and 7 Deadly Diseases (Deming, 1982). While different experts may disagree as to which of the 14 points are paramount and which of the 7 Deadly Diseases are most pernicious, it is probably accurate to describe the Deming view by 11 characteristics:

1. Focus on the customer;
2. A "systems" approach;
3. A long-term relationship with suppliers;
4. Enlarged communication and dialogue between workers in different divisions and levels. Employee involvement in continuous problem solving and decision making;
5. Understanding of variation, with processes in "statistical control";
6. Replacement of numerical goals by methods to improve the process;
7. Abolition of merit pay and performance evaluation;
8. Adoption of a Learning Cycle known as PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act);
9. Elimination of "non-value-added" parts of processes;
10. Emphasis on training and education;
11. Replacement of competition by cooperation.

Each of these characteristics has implications for basic skills trainers in a high performance workplace.

At this point, a word of warning is warranted. Total Quality Management is intended to be a total package rather than a pick and choose exercise. Together, the elements add up to what has been called the three "Cs" -- Customer, Counting, Culture (Sashkin, Kiser, 1993). There is, however, a great deal of diversity in HOW the philosophy has been implemented in various workplaces. Some companies have embraced certain aspects enthusiastically, while leaving others untouched. Others have made every effort to have a full-scale implementation, with differing degrees of success, depending on the level of commitment and the care taken in implementation. This may cause confusion for an adult educator gaining access to a company for the first time. It will be helpful to remember that TQM, as any emerging management philosophy, will need time to develop. You may detect, therefore, chinks in the armour-and perhaps even the mixing of diametrically opposed philosophies within a single workplace. Knowing the core of the philosophy, however, will assist you to sort out anomalies, and thus deal more effectively with the workplace realities which you meet.

Implications

Basic Skills service providers have always prided themselves on their knowledge of adult learning needs and teaching methodologies, and rightly so. Knowledge of the new management theories and their application is, however, equally important if training is to be relevant for the evolving workplace reality. Many adult educators are beginning to realize that management styles are just as important as learning styles, and that the TQ environment will shape all training activity in ways previously not considered.

Here is some advice to guide basic skills trainers in a TQ environment:

1. Take a "systems" approach to the basic skills need assessment. This should fully take into account the total system, from supplier to customer, and recognize the lateral rather than hierarchical nature of working relationships.
2. Learn the ABCs of Total Quality. Then realize that there is much adversity in implementation. Talk to managers, labour representatives, and workers to find out which elements of TQM are scrupulously observed and which are only partially implemented.
3. Keep in mind that statistical concepts are an important aspect of TQM. Some workers may need help in understanding the basics of statistical thinking before they can appreciate the diversity of statistical tools and their uses. You can help by building this knowledge base, using their own experiences. The investigate how the various statistical tools will lead to continuous improvement.
4. Be aware of the ways in which "language based knowledge" and "numbers based knowledge" intertwine in the use of statistical tools. It may help if trainees are encouraged to interpret control charts and their implications in words (spoken and written) to facilitate analytical thinking of how statistical information can be used (just drawing up the charts correctly is not enough). Use the completed charts as a basic for dialogue.
5. Illustrate how various tools can be applied to measurement of production or administrative processes. Assist trainees to determine which tools are clearer in identifying trends, in establishing process capability, in distinguishing between natural and unnatural variation. Then move from the classroom to the shop floor so that real life scenarios can be added to simulations done in the classroom.
6. Remember that the psychological (affective) aspects of Total Quality are just as important as the statistical tools. In planning course content and approaches, give consideration to how to encourage employee empowerment and decision making. This will mean helping trainees identify areas in which they would like to improve their skills so that they can act more autonomously. Mould your role to facilitator rather than instructor. And, since education is just as important as training in a TQ environment, you will be able to focus content on learning goals which go beyond immediate workplace concerns. This will be important to educators who favour a holistic approach to learning.
7. Examine the degree of commitment to TQM in the workplaces in which you are provided training. Some companies are paying lip service only to TQM. Others are facing considerable labour resistance. Such factors will affect the organizational culture in major ways, not the least of which is the extent to which workers will be empowered to take autonomous actions.

8. Remember that TQM is intended to be a total package rather than a "mix and match" choice. "Doing SPC," for instance, without placing it squarely within the parameters of continuous improvement misses the point. The implications for training are obvious. Training in SPC goes beyond the statistical content and goes to the underlying uses relating to process modification. What is the use of learning to apply the tools if no change occurs as a result?

Some adult educator may view this advice with bemusement. After all, a great deal of training is presently taking place that does not take into account these precepts, yet are affording satisfaction to both trainers and trainees. Clearly, one should not throw the baby out with the bath water. It is not so much that present training practices should be ended but rather that they should evolve in ways which reflect the Continuous Improvement paradigm. If, for instance, workers attain only technical statistical skills without the required communicative and problem solving skills, Continuous Improvement will not happen.

However, just as one begins to feel comfortable with the world of Total Quality, related movements appear on the horizon. They are realities, not mirages. Expect to move from Total Quality to the related world of ISO 9000. "ISO" is the International Standards Organizations and ISO 9000 refers to quality standards, originally developed in Europe for the European Economic Community, but is now appearing in a workplace near you! Many companies which have already introduced TQ are securing their competitive advantage through registering their quality performance with an ISO certifying body. While ISO 9000 is not a part of the TQ movement as such, there is a link. Companies which have proceeded a good distance along the road of Continuous Improvement should find that they have little difficulty in meeting ISO's requirement.

Whatever model is used to describe the approach to quality improvement, whether it is TQM, ISO 9000 or some other terms such as Bench-marking or Process Re-engineering, it is important to keep in mind that all these approaches are aiming for the same goal - continuously improved quality in products and service. The development of numeracy skills will be an essential aspect in securing this improvement. As a matter of fact, some employees who have dealt with numeracy very little in their worklife, will now be exposed to a variety of statistical concepts and problems. They will require assistance in making sense of these new dimensions of their jobs. Numeracy is only one aspect of the broader network of skills which also includes literacy, creative thinking and problem solving. None of these skills exists in a vacuum removed from the others. Therefore, language based and numbers based skills deserve to be integrated throughout the learning process, rather than separated into distinct phases as has often occurred in the past.

There is bound to be a certain degree of discomfort as educators previously unexposed to "transformation" management theories discover the multi-faceted nature of the Total Quality philosophy and the extent of its reach. It may be a Leviathan, but it is a Leviathan with energy. Educators who take on the giant may find the struggle worth the battle.