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A journey from QCs to IQACs

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ABSTRACT

It is the quality and excellence that matters. These are deciding factors in any organization. Quality is what makes the difference between things being excellent or run of the mill. Quality Circles or Quality Control Circles as they are called in Japan, is a participative philosophy woven around Quality Control and problem solving at the bottom level. It exemplifies the policy of people building, respect for human beings and creates participative management culture.

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Introduction

In the era of cut throat competition where 'perform or perish' is the rule, the term 'Quality' has come to occupy pivotal position in organizations of various colours and sizes. The degree of importance of this term increases manifold in the dynamic organizations that face the challenges of development and rapid changes. In fact, quality has become the buzz word. The customer has started getting due significance and qualities attaining new dimensions and values. It is an accepted fact today that no organization can prosper and grow unless it pays continuous attention to quality of its people, products and services.

There is a growing enthusiasm and concern for embracing the 'quality culture'. People venture to attain as close as possible to 100 percent quality and not even 99 percent.¹ Total Quality Management, Quality Control, Quality Assurance, Quality Circles, Total Quality Education, CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement) etc. are the quality management systems getting increased attention and becoming crucial for the survival of an organization.

It is the quality and excellence that matters. These are deciding factors in any organization. Quality is what makes the difference between things being excellent or run of the mill. Quality Circles or Quality Control Circles as they are called in Japan, is a participative philosophy woven around Quality Control and problem solving at the bottom level. It exemplifies the policy of people building, respect for human beings and creates participative management culture.

1. Subroto Bagachi, Towards World Class, Management Review – September, October-December, (1996), pp 16-24

This privilege of participation was denied in the earlier management practices based on Taylorism adopted by many developing nations. Things have changed today and thanks to

Japanese approach to management. If an organization wants to prosper, it has to harness and take continuous improvement efforts at all levels of employees in the organization.

The Japanese understood the simple truth that sophisticated equipments and tools alone cannot help the commander to win the war unless the people using them know how to use them. The attainment of a quality depends not merely on the tools and techniques but also on the people striving for it. The Japanese applied this notion successfully in resurrecting their nation after the destruction of Second World War. They used quality education for all levels of workforce as the means to inculcate an attitude for quality and excellence which Dr. K. Ishikawa called 'thought revolution'. He showed that knowledge is the real power. He believed that removal of knowledge disparities shall empower every employee to develop to his fullest potential. This can be applied to people in any organization irrespective of their caste, creed and nationality.

By refusing to separate the management and workforce into water-tight compartments, the concept of Quality Circles made a radical departure from the western style of management. In the Quality Circle approach, the task performers at the grass-root level are given the privilege of participation in progress and to have a say in the work they do. Similarly, when we apply in academics, we suppose that people performing the tasks can rise to the occasion, solve their problems and recommend solutions provided the knowledge to analyze their problems is given. Ownership and responsibility towards the task are passed to the teachers and students doing the job. Quality Circles in academics do not segregate management, teachers and students into different blocks but treat them all as seekers of truth, together treading the path of knowledge. This in essence is the conceptual frame of the Quality Circles when we apply them in education.

Nothing is constant in this world. The adage 'change is the law of nature' aptly proves in case of Quality Circles. They started in industries but their enormous benefits extended their journey to service sector such as banking, insurance, hospital, hotels and now finally they have ventured to education. A brief count of this journey of Quality Circles from industries to education is given below-

With the commencement of the Second World War, many companies in Japan were severally affected. Japanese goods came to be known for their low cost and labeled low quality. It was only in the 1950's that quality became the national policy of the Japanese Government. Since the people were untrained for quality and the whole nation without proper guidance, the services of Prof. Deming, Dr. J. N. Juran and others were consciously borrowed. The Japanese totally involved themselves for quality improvement which was further intensified when JUSE (Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers) headed by Dr. Ishikawa was formed.

Under the guidance of these Quality Gurus, Japan started with the concept of Quality Circles. The operation of Quality Circles in industries and their high rate of success made the quality control movement a social movement in industrial environment and the successful functioning of the new philosophy proved a boon to Japanese industries. With approximately more than 1 million Quality Circles in operation, Japan has emerged a highly sophisticated industrial power. An island, highly over populated with a small land area, defeated in the war, and popularly known as the junk merchant of the world, emerged an economic and high technology leader with lower costs and high quality products. With fast growing GNP, Japan today dominates in one selected industry after another, eclipsing British motor cycles, American automobiles, Swiss watches, German cameras, optical instruments, electronic goods, etc.

Such outstanding results are not the outcome of increased resources and planned investments, but a display of unique spirit of national unity, patriotism, pride and an utmost fanatical loyalty to the organization in which Japanese are engaged. The bottom line of all development is the human factor. Japan owes its success more to the mind-set of its workforce than high technology which was achieved through Quality Circles. After successful launching of Quality Circles in Japan, the success story traveled to other nations and presently more than 50 countries are being benefited by Quality Circles including India.

The credit for introducing the first Quality Circles in India goes to Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd., at Ramachandrapuram, Hyderabad unit in January 1981. The Quality Circles were started with the objectives of improving quality of services, good working conditions and job satisfaction to all employees, reducing stress, strain and costs. After the tremendous success of Quality Circles at Ramachandrapuram, Hyderabad unit of BHEL, the movement took roots in all other units of the company which are now producing modern components comparable to the most advanced in the world.

After a great deal of groundwork and training of facilitators, Quality Circles were started at the Maruti Udyog Ltd. on Japanese pattern. About the experience of Quality Circles, Managing Director Mr. R.C. Bhargava commented "Real technology transfer is not written down. It takes place in the minds of the people and the very little things done are very important". This approach has been responsible for high productivity at Maruti.

SAIL is yet another example of a public sector undertaking which has gained strength and growth in the recent decade due to the continuous emphasis on quality control and management through Quality Circles.

Bokaro Steel Plant located in Bihar is one of the largest public sector steel units in India. The plant also boasts of being one of the pioneers in successful operations of Quality Circles activities. Quality Circles at TELCO also known as Small Group Activity (SGA) started functioning in 1983. Even TISCO at Jamshedpur is reported to have recently started Quality Circles.

There are more than 300 Quality Circles operating today in Modi Rubber Ltd. The concept was introduced in the year 1982 at Kanpur, a totally labour-intensive jute textile industry. On similar lines in 1985, in a phased manner, the tractor division of Mahindra & Mahindra introduced their own Quality Circles.

There is much involvement & enthusiasm among Quality Circle members in manufacturing units. Today, there are over 300 organizations which have set up more than 20,000 Quality Circles all over the country. As early as in 1982 professional bodies like the Quality Circle Forum of India and Indian Association for Quality & Reliability had been formed to create an awareness of Quality Circles movement in India.

The successful experience of State Bank of India, Canara Bank and Bank of Baroda has acted as eye-opener towards implementation of Quality Circles in service sector.

The achievement of PWD, Maharashtra has set an example for the Government organizations marching on the path of quality improvement through Quality Circles.

When so much has been achieved in manufacturing and service sector, should sectors like education lag behind?

The research findings on Quality Circles although conducted in industrial environments have implications for education. The studies indicate that Quality Circles can 'develop' the human resources. So education can benefit tremendously by initiating Quality Circles. The feeling of 'oneness' with the organization, personality development, sense of fulfillment are the chief benefits reported in industry which can also be exploited in education.

Quality Circles philosophy, a value based concept has also been fruitfully adopted in schools for infusing a spirit of excellence, emotional development, human harmony, cooperation, character building and discipline. The credit for introducing the concept of Quality Circles in education in India goes to

Mr. Jagdish Gandhi. It was during his visit to Japan in 1992 that Mr. Gandhi first became aware of Quality Control Circles (QCC) and how Prof. Ishikawa successfully shaped them formally within factories and offices for the purpose of improving the quality of manufactured goods and services on continuous basis. The SQCC (Student Quality Control Circles) site was conceived and launched by Prakash Chandra Bihari, a mechanical engineer previously with Indian Railways, now with C.M.S., Lucknow (U.P.).

A Quality Circle movement, involving about 70,000 schools and about 4,00,000 teachers and students has started in Hyderabad by Andhra Pradesh Government in coordination with the QCFI.

Indian Institute of Management (IIMs); IIT, Calcutta; Nagpur University and College of Engineering of Anna University, Madras formed Quality Circles to improve the quality of higher education.

The continuing concern for quality of higher education in India has projected the need for evaluation of performance of

universities and colleges. This has led to the establishment of NAAC as an autonomous body of the U.G.C., New Delhi on 16 September 1994 to assess and accredit educational institutions of higher learning. NAAC has made it compulsory for all educational institutions of higher learning to establish Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs)- as post accreditation quality sustenance activity. The vision is to make quality the defining element of higher education in India through a combination of self and external quality evaluation, promotion and sustenance initiatives. The guidelines for establishment of IQACs states "QUALITY CIRCLES IN INDUSTRIES OPERATE ON SIMILAR LINES". It means the Quality Circles of industries are IQACs of educational institutions of higher learning.

Quality Circles in education are also becoming very popular all over the world. In Indian context, CMS, Lucknow can be regarded as leader for this. Quality Circles in education in India are at their infancy stage which needs nurture and care. It is quite natural for this philosophy to face teething problems.

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