

Safety Shoes: Resistance to Change

Description

At the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, many of the existing factories housed few machines. Human labor was still the principal force behind many of the manufacturing processes, particularly when it came to handling materials.

The all-important task of moving materials from one spot to another was placed in the hands of the work force, which, naturally, was fallible. Items were occasionally dropped, and many of the items were heavy enough to break toes or mangle feet.

Fortunately, someone soon invented the safety shoe, a steel-reinforced boot that was proven to withstand the impacts that occurred on the factory floor. Manufacturers embraced the new footwear, promoting its use and even subsidizing the cost to make it more accessible to the factory workers. Many men bought the shoes, but not many actually chose to wear them.

That workers would decline to wear these boots was puzzling to management. The reinforced shoes would result in fewer injuries and, therefore, fewer absences from work, a benefit to both the manufacturers and the workers. There was no apparent reason not to use them.

A deeper examination of the problem determined that the cause was rooted in social issues. Aside from their bulky look, the shoes stamped their wearers as factory workers, a social postmark that many workers' wives found unappealing. When this reasoning was uncovered, the makers of the safety shoe redesigned it to look like a dress shoe. With the social stigma thus stomped out, use of the safety shoe increased dramatically.

Learning Points

Quality management generally involves two types of changes: a technological change and a cultural change. The immediate effect of these changes will often take the form of resistance from employees. By recognizing the potential for resistance, senior management can take preventive steps to lessen the negative impact. Executive management must communicate the need and benefit of technical changes throughout the organization. General "town hall" meetings, newsletters, videos, focus groups, "skip level" (executive to employee) interviews, meetings with small groups of employees, and other appropriate channels are needed to dispel and/or condition resistance to change. Candor, honesty, and integrity of communication are essential characteristics of the communication effort, even to the point of "open book management," i.e., the sharing of the "financials" with all levels to show both the need and the benefit of quality management (and its accompanying changes) to the organization.

Discussion Questions

Question: Can you think of any examples in your organization where quality initiatives were met with resistance?

Answer: Responses will vary. Probe: What steps were taken to counteract this resistance? How successful were these steps?

Question: How can an organization overcome resistance to change brought on by a quality management initiative?

Answer: Factors which help to overcome resistance to changes engendered by managing for quality include the following.

- **Provide participation.** Participation in the process offers employees an opportunity to contribute and a measure of responsibility for the new business dynamics, resulting in a sense of ownership and, therefore, a greater tolerance for the changes.
- **Avoid surprises.** A Monday morning shake-up, implemented without warning, is a sure-fire way to rankle and embitter employees who once felt that they were a part of the process.
- **Allow time for the change to sink in.** Restructuring business processes takes time, both for acceptance of the new system and for retraining employees in their new roles within that system. Hastening the process will result in frustration and resistance.
- **Start small.** As the saying goes, the longest journey begins with a single step. Total quality management is a journey which cannot be completed by one initial leap.
- **Stay flexible.** Managing for quality is not a rigid structure to be imposed dictatorially; rather, it is a growth process that must make room for ever-changing external factors as well as individual internal differences.
- **Integrate the changes within existing structures.** Employees are familiar with the current structure; incorporating changes within a structure that parallels the current business processes will offer a built-in comfort level that will ease the employees' transition from the old processes to the new ones.