

## **The Village Blacksmith: Empowered Employees**

### **Description**

The village blacksmith of yore was a highly skilled craftsman, a technological wizard of his time who could magically transform lumps of hot iron into the tools and implements of daily life. From hammers and nails to pots, pans, door hinges, and wagon harnesses, the blacksmith had his hand in nearly every metal object made.

His work in many ways foreshadowed the multiple processes of today's quality organizations. Of course, the blacksmith did not have a large staff of employees, each trained in a particular skill or process. The smithy handled every function of his business by himself.

By taking on the diverse tasks and responsibilities himself, the village blacksmith became intimately familiar with not only the individual needs of his customers, but also with the interrelationships of each step of his work process. His product inspection altered future product designs; his testing of the product influenced his future production process; he learned the impact of customer service on future sales.

This involvement in every function of the business essentially turned him into his own customer, creating the shortest feedback loop possible. He knew what worked, what did not work, and what could be done better. Such insight allowed the blacksmith to improve his work process on a continual basis, a cycle known as the spiral of progress in quality.

Today, quality organizations are abandoning the specialization approach that Frederick Taylor made popular at the beginning of the century. Instead of being responsible for a small, isolated piece of the work process, employees are becoming "generalists." While it would be impossible to duplicate the blacksmith's total immersion in all business functions, quality organizations train their key personnel in multiple skills, to enable them to handle all or the majority of the activities in their work process. This education instills the employees with an overall understanding of the internal customer needs and a knowledge of the integral role each work process step plays in achieving the ultimate goal of delighting the external customers. Decreased process cost and cycle time reductions are added benefits.

### **Learning Points**

Today's worker is very different from the typical employee at the start of the century. Frederick Taylor tried to compensate for the generally unskilled and uneducated worker who fled to the city from the farm looking for work. Taylor broke the job down into its smallest components so that a worker could become an expert in just one aspect of the job. In addition, the planning of the work was separated out and put in the hands of management. Managers were paid to make decisions and plan the work, while workers were paid to do, not to think.

Today's worker is very different and much better educated. A major tenet of Total Quality Management is that we need to put the planning and execution back in the hands of those who **do** the work. Not only does it make good business sense to have those who are closest to the customer be more empowered and involved, but economic and technological changes have eliminated many middle managers who may have been counted upon in the past.

## Discussion Questions

**Question:** What do you think is meant by the term “empowered” employee?

**Answer:** An empowered employee is one who has the ability and the authority to correct the work process he or she performs whenever the process fails to meet expected results. An empowered employee must be in a state of self-control for empowerment to be a successful management strategy. In addition to self-control, employees must have the means and authority to take recovery action when the customer is dissatisfied. Finally, employees must be provided opportunity for individual participation in quality.

**Question:** What requirements do you suppose must be present if employees are to exercise self-control in their jobs effectively?

**Answer:** There are three conditions that must be present for employees to be in self-control.

- Know what is expected of them, e.g., performance objectives that are clearly communicated and understood.
- Know how they (the workers) are doing with respect to expectations.
- Have the ability to regulate the process, i.e., the means to satisfy their performance objectives.

**Question:** What does it mean to “regulate the process”?

**Answer:** Since the ability to regulate a process successfully is one of the keys to empowerment and self-control, it is important to understand the requirements needed to regulate a process.

- The process is capable of meeting the expected performance.
- The people have the necessary tools, knowledge, skills, and equipment.
- People have the authority to make the needed adjustments to assure that performance is meeting expectations.

If employees are in self-control, **they** are accountable. If they are not in self-control, management is accountable.

**Question:** What is meant by recovery?

**Answer:** Employees have the means and the authority to take recovery action whenever their customer is experiencing an unsatisfactory situation. Authority for recovery and its means are explicitly provided . . . not assumed.