

## **QUALITY AND ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT: MIDDLE MANAGERS' VIEWS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

There is increasing interest in understanding why quality programs persist or fail in organisations. Several studies have identified key program success factors, such as top management support. Recently, several writers have argued that an organisational culture perspective is a useful framework to analyse program implementation, as it captures multiple levels of complexity. Here data are presented from fifteen organisations that have quality programs. These organisations are evaluated through the eyes of their middle managers who participated in a questionnaire survey. The results suggest that cultures that are most supportive of a quality program score higher on a number of key measures compared to less well performing organisations.

**Keywords: Quality Management, Middle Managers, Quality Culture**

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is increasing interest in identifying and understanding factors that contribute to the effectiveness of change programs like quality management. Especially understanding why these programs persist or fail [3]. Research indicates that many factors combine together in a complex way to produce a cultural in which quality management can be nurtured and produce good business performance [24].

The purpose of the paper is to attempt to identify the mix of factors which are important in forming a supportive/compatible culture for an effective quality program and to compare these findings with the literature. The data used is from a study of the beliefs and attitudes of middle managers towards quality programs in their organisations [6]. In this research sufficient data was collected from fifteen organisations surveyed to enable them to be compared. The majority of data were collected via a questionnaire completed by middle managers in participating organisations. A number of interviews were also carried out with middle and senior managers. The data was subjected to statistical analysis.

The terms quality management and TQM are used interchangeably in this paper.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The data collected was a middle management view of quality management in their organisations. Middle managers are a diverse group, some considering themselves primarily professionals rather than primarily managers. The concept of the middle manager is a hazy one: there is no generally accepted definition of a middle manager.

The radical changes of the 1980s led to widespread dissatisfaction among middle managers who saw their status and power being reduced and job security and promotional opportunities under threat. There were predictions of the demise of middle management, especially because of increased use of information technology. Such predictions represented the gloomy view of the future of middle management [8] [9]. However these gloomy predictions did not generally occur and middle managers seem far from being a spent force in larger organisations. A number of writers have provided support for the importance of middle managers in contemporary organisations. Nonaka and Takeuchi [22] argue that middle managers have together with top managers an important role in knowledge management in their organisations. Hilmer and Donaldson [17] are also strong defenders of middle management. They argue that the complex tasks middle managers do in large organisations cannot be replaced effectively by computer based information systems. Over a number of years Floyd and Wooldridge [13] have argued that the middle managers' role in decision making has increased. More recently, Blumentritt and Hardie [4] make a case for the importance of middle management in the knowledge focused service organisation and Hornsby et al. [15] recognise that middle managers have an important role in corporate entrepreneurship. An article presenting a very positive account of the benefits middle managers can bring to an organisation has appeared in the influential *Harvard Business Review* [16]. Research also suggests that middle managers are generally more satisfied with their jobs than in the 1980s [12]. In contrast to this more optimistic view of middle management work a recent study in a number of different European companies [18] reports a complex and stressful work situation for many middle managers, which the authors argue can be described as depowerment. Factors contributing to this situation included; lacking adequate resources, having dual allegiances to senior management and to those they manage, increasing scrutiny of their performance and high workloads. Complaining about high workload is a continuing theme in the middle management literature, dating back at least to the seminal research of Rosemary Stewart [26].

There appears to have been very little research that has directly addressed the role of middle managers in quality programs. Literature reviewed identified that effective involvement of middle managers is important for the success of quality programs [2][10][29]. A review of some of the writings of quality experts such as Deming, Crosby, Juran, Ishikawa and others found scant mention of any specific role for middle managers in quality interventions.

The organisations surveyed had ongoing TQM type programs and several of them also had obtained ISO 9000 certification. TQM and ISO 9000 are two of the most common formal approaches to quality. TQM is a broad approach to quality based on a number of principles including employee involvement in organisational change. This broad TQM approach is often implemented through the use of quality award frameworks. Australia has the Australian Business Excellence Framework, the US, the "Baldrige" framework and Europe, the European Quality Award Framework [11]. There are many other country specific frameworks. These frameworks are very similar and contain many ideas from the seminal work by Deming [7] and also incorporate more recent ideas, such as those on corporate social responsibility and sustainability. The frameworks provide guidance on how to implement TQM and sustain it in the organisation. It should be noted that there is evidence that TQM programs have been in decline in recent years [27][28].

There has been much interest in the effectiveness of the TQM approach in organisations. One factor that emerges consistently from the literature as important for the success of a quality program is top management support [5][21][29]. Recent research by Taylor and Wright [27] reinforces this view. They reported on a 5 year longitudinal study of 109 UK organisations that had implemented TQM programs. They found that lack of management commitment was the most frequently cited reason for the discontinuance of TQM programs. Senior management commitment was seen in terms of giving their time to the TQM program, supporting a strategic view of TQM and making resources available for TQM. Taylor and Wright found that if a TQM program was led by senior management then it had much better chance of success, suggesting that TQM programs need to be led from the top. The role of leadership in quality and top management support is an important component of both the quality award framework approach and the ISO 9000:2000 approach described above. Essentially, top management is responsible for legitimising a quality program and providing the resources needed to run it. In models of quality management top management leadership is seen as having a strong element of continuity, or as Deming [7] puts it “constancy of purpose”.

Another factor which is considered central to the TQM approach and has also received considerable attention in the literature is employee involvement [12][20]. Getting employees involved in quality activities is a central pillar of the TQM approach. The debate has focused mainly on how employees can be engaged effectively in quality related activities in their organisations. Employee Involvement (EI) practices, such as team work are put forward as appropriate ways in which employees contribute to quality programs.

Recent literature has emphasised the complexity of TQM as an organisational change process. Having good “scores” on individual factors such as top management support is not sufficient to ensure an effective quality program. Samson and Challis [24] in their research into what makes a successful organisation identify fourteen principles of effective organisations but acknowledge that it is difficult to understand the complex way in which these interact to produce such high variability in the sample of organisations they studied. One approach to understanding this complexity is to examine TQM in its cultural framework. Kujala and Lillrank [19] have examined TQM from this perspective, reviewing studies that have adopted this approach. They justify their approach as a multi level cultural analysis matches the complexity of TQM. They claim that TQM goes beyond implementing technical practices and requires a fundamental change in the way in which organisational members work together to meet customer requirements. Using a cultural framework based on Schein [25] they identify a number of possible mismatches between basic underlying assumptions of TQM and the artefacts and espoused values of the organisation. For example, they point out that in TQM an underlying assumption is that the customer is the most important stakeholder and that this may not be the case as this assumption contradicts stakeholder theory. Although they see TQM, as represented by the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award Framework, as a set of mutually compatible basic assumptions they argue that difficulties in implementation can be due to a mismatch between these assumptions and an organisation’s culture. They identify two approaches to alignment suggested in the literature; either adjusting the principles of TQM to be compatible with organisation culture or changing culture to align with TQM principles and practices.

Beer [3] argues that the failure of TQM to become part of an organizations culture is not due to inadequate TQM theory and methodology, but arises from poor implementation by management.

He presents four propositions related to managements' role for effective TQM implementation. The propositions relate to senior managements' role in developing commitment to TQM, following up their initial commitment with appropriate action and facilitating honest discussion and learning about TQM effectiveness. These management capabilities should exist in all subunits of an organisation in order for successful TQM transformation to take place.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data presented here are from a study of the beliefs and attitudes of middle managers towards quality programs in their organisations [6]. The main objective of the research was to identify factors that were important in forming the attitudes of middle managers towards quality programs in their organisations. In this research middle managers were defined as "the broad group of people who occupy positions in between – in an hierarchical sense – first-line supervisor and senior management". Participating organisations identified their middle managers within this broad definition.

Twenty-one large and medium sized organisations from the private and public sectors participated in the research. All of the organisations had a formal quality program. Most of the quality programs were TQM based, with many also incorporating ISO 9000 certification. A number of the participating organisations had won Australian Quality Awards. Data was collected in two ways. Firstly, a self-report questionnaire was developed and distributed to a sample of middle managers in each of the participating organisations. Over 550 usable responses were received; a response rate of approximately 50%. Responses from fifteen of the organisations were large enough to conduct some inter-organisation comparisons. A comparison of these fifteen organisations forms the focus of this paper. Secondly, after some preliminary analysis of the questionnaire data thirty follow-up interviews were conducted middle managers, senior managers and quality specialist in ten of the organisations. The quantitative results were analysed using the SPSS statistical package. Analysis of variance and multiple regression analysis were the main multivariate techniques used to analyse the data. Exploratory factor analysis was used in a confirmatory sense with established scales and for data reduction purposes prior to multiple linear regression. Qualitative data from the survey questionnaires and from interviews was transcribed and subjected to content analysis.

The design of the questionnaire and in particular the variables included was selected from reference to relevant literature, particularly attitude research and research into employee involvement. For example, attitude research shows that the beliefs that an individual holds about the impact of a quality program and about the strength of support from "important others" like the top management team, can influence their attitude towards the program [1]. Typically, positive beliefs about program outcomes and top management program support lead to positive program attitudes. The literature suggests that a number of other variables can influence the views that middle managers have about quality programs in their organisations. These variables may for example have a mediating or moderating effect on beliefs and attitudes rather than a direct effect. Further, it can be argued many of the variables measured in this research are either directly or indirectly related to organisational culture as described by Kujala and Lillrank [19]. For example, three work related measures were made, namely; organisational commitment, role

conflict and role ambiguity. In order to assist the interpretation of the results presented here Table 1 below provides a brief description of the main variables used in this research.

**Table 1. Details of Main Variable Used**

<b>Name of variable</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Enthusiasm for quality in organisation	Measure of individual's attitude to involvement in quality in their organisation. (3 items)
Effectiveness of quality management approach	Individuals belief about the effectiveness of the TQM approach to managing an organisation. (1 item)
Increase in (overall) job satisfaction	A measure of the overall increase in job satisfaction for individual resulting from program. (1 item)
Time spent on quality related activities	An overall measure of the time spent by an individual on activities particularly related to quality. (1 item)
Individuals' personal details	Gender, age group
Individuals' job related details	Organisational tenure, job tenure, job level, job type
Organisational commitment	A measure of an employee's identification and involvement with their organisation. (scale from Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian, 1974)
Role conflict	Degree of incongruity or incompatibility of expectations associated with the role. (Scale from Rizzo, House and Lirtzman, 1970)
Role ambiguity	Lack of clarity and predictability of one's behaviour in a work context. (scale from Rizzo, House and Lirtzman, 1970)
Top management program support & communications	An overall measure of program support from the top management group (6 items)
Boss and colleagues program support	Program support from individual's direct boss and colleagues. (3 items).
Organisational benefits	Program benefits related to the organisation. (12 items)
Individual benefits	Program benefits related to the individual. (7 items)
Devolution of responsibility	A measure of willingness to devolve responsibility. (3 items related to group work and lower level employees having more responsibility).
Rewards (pay etc) based on quality performance	(1 item)
Overall workload increase	Workload increase resulting from program. 1 item
Accountability for job performance	Increase in accountability for job performance as a result of quality program. (1 item)
Perceived stage of program development	Scale from just starting to fully implemented. (Not a measure of how long the program had been running) (1 item)
Active program involvement	Yes/No
Education/training in quality	Yes/No and type of training
Program tenure	Years
Program role clarity	Scale from, not clear to very clear. (1 item)

## RESULTS

Average age of respondents to the questionnaire survey was 41 years, mean organisational tenure was 12.6 years and a large proportion (78%) had received some formal training/education in quality. Overall middle managers were supportive of the TQM approach to change. There were mixed view on the effectiveness of ISO9000. A stepwise multiple regression analysis of the

whole sample revealed that the following variables were significantly related to middle managers' attitudes towards quality programs in their organisation:

- • Program support from their boss and colleagues
- • Program benefits for the organisation
- • Increase in job satisfaction from program and
- • Having education and training in quality

To some extent these overall findings mask some of the complexity that was evident in the data. One-way ANOVA for means and Chi-square tests for categorical variables, revealed many significant differences between the fifteen organisations that are the focus of this paper.

Table 2 shows a comparison of the 15 organisations on a number of variable that collectively contribute significantly to the culture of these organisations. The organisations have been ranked on each item, 1 representing the most favourable ranking on items. An overall ranking of the organisations has been made by counting the number of item rankings better than 7 (i.e. ranks 1 to 6). The organisations have been listed with in order of the number of rankings better than 7. For example organisations 2 has the highest number of rankings better than 7 and organisation 14 the lowest number.

Table 3 shows results of a correlation analysis between a number of key program and work related variables and "enthusiasm for quality in the organisation". "Enthusiasm for quality in the organisation" is an overall measure of respondents' attitudes towards quality in their organisations. Quality specialist were omitted from this analysis as it was found that they had significantly more positive attitudes toward quality than other job categories. This is most likely because their professional role in quality in the organisation has led to them having a vested interest in quality [1].

**Table 2. A Comparative Ranking of Organisations**

Item	Company (listed in order of no. of rankings better than 7)														
	2	9	4	8	15	13	11	1	10	12	3	6	7	5	14
Enthusiasm for involvement in quality in organisation	2	4	5	1	9	5	3	11	8	15	7	13	12	10	14
Program support and communications culture	1	4	8	3	7	9	2	5	6	15	11	10	12	13	14
Quality program role clarity – those actively involved	2	1	3	7	6	9	10	5	11	4	8	12	13	15	14
Stage of program development	3	1	6	5	2	12	9	3	10	7	13	15	14	11	8
Time spent on quality related activities	9	5	1	3	6	4	1	9	7	11	13	15	14	7	11
Percentage actively involved in quality program	2	11	8	1	9	5	6	12	3	10	13	4	7	15	14
Percentage with education/training in quality	1	8	3	11	7	6	4	9	5	13	2	15	10	13	12
Likely program benefits for the organisation	1	2	8	3	6	9	10	7	4	13	5	15	12	11	14
Likely program benefits for the individual (respondents)	1	3	10	11	4	13	2	5	8	15	12	14	6	7	9
Organisational commitment	2	1	7	9	4	6	10	5	11	2	8	13	15	14	11
Role ambiguity	2	3	1	9	4	9	9	8	7	6	5	12	15	14	13
Role conflict	3	4	2	6	9	4	9	9	8	12	13	1	14	15	7
<b>Number of ranks better than 7 (i.e. 1 highest)</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

Item ranks based on mean values or percentage of the particular variable. A rank of 1 represents the most favourable e.g. highest percentage trained in quality, highest organisational commitment score. For role ambiguity and role conflict a rank of 1 indicates the lowest mean scores.

a: This is weighted average of the “to what extent does this happen in your organisation” responses (scale from 1=not at all to 7=to a great extent) to items related to top management program support and communications on quality and items related to program support from the middle managers boss and colleagues.

Sample sizes in organisations ranged from 16 respondents to 93 respondents.

**Table 3: Correlations with “Enthusiasm for Quality in the Organisation”  
- by Organisation (quality specialists excluded from sample)**

Org.	Org. Commit.	Role ambiguity	Top mgt. program support & comm.	Boss & colleagues program support	Org. program benefits	Individual program benefits	Increase in job sat. from program	Devolution of responsibility
1	.50***	-.45***	.37**	.54***	.59***	.47***	.57***	.45***
2	.18	-.06	.39	.37	.68***	.43	.41	.38
3	.04	.11	.38	.40*	.40	.24	.35	.08
4	.48*	-.47*	.42	.49*	.55*	.50*	.58**	.29
5	.43*	-.45*	.39	.59**	.63**	.67**	.68**	.09
6	.14	-.12	-.04	.19	.13	.03	.03	.15
7	.06	-.26	.17	.40*	.47**	.38*	.54**	.53**
8	.42	-.43	.14	.23	.48	.13	.19	-.03
9	.45	-.58*	.84***	.77*	.64**	.17	.58**	.52**
10	.51**	-.13	.50**	.43*	.60**	.49**	.49*	.24
11	.28	-.61**	.61**	.51**	.49*	.48*	.33	.29
12	.29	-.22	.17	.18	.54*	.45*	.61**	.02
13	.40	-.18	.27	.35	.40	.05	.62**	.64**
14	.24*	-.38***	.37***	.65***	.56***	.42***	.46***	.22**
15	.39*	-.32	.45*	.46*	.60***	.17	.58**	.31
All above	.31***	-.34***	.38***	.52***	.54***	.37***	.48***	.30***

\*  $p \leq 0.05$

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$

Sample sizes in organisations ranged from 13 to 91

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results in Table 2 suggest that organisations with the best overall rankings score well on a package of factors that are identified in the literature as important for program success. Program specific measures i.e. program support and communications culture, quality program role clarity, percentage with education/training in quality and likelihood of program benefits for the organisation seem particularly important for middle managers' program enthusiasm. These results are consistent with other research on program success factors [21][3]. More general work related measures i.e. organisational commitment, role conflict and role ambiguity evaluate key aspects of the work environment in which the quality program is embedded. The correlation analysis in Table 2 provides some evidence of a significant relationship between these variables and middle managers' attitudes towards quality in their organisations. It should be noted that sample sizes for some of the organisations were relatively small.

Some commentary on organisation 2 and organisation 14 will serve to illustrate the importance



of understanding context in relation to the results presented. It should be noted that organisation 2 and organisation 14 are at the extreme ends of the ranking show in Table 2. Interviews were conducted with managers in both of these organisations and a significant proportion of questionnaire respondents from both organisations provided responses to an open-ended question on their quality programs.

Organisation 14 had been a leader in quality, one of the first Australia service organisations to apply ideas of TQM in a very active and successful way. They had been a recipient of an Australian quality award. At the time of the survey the management was reassessing its support for the TQM approach and seemed to be moving to less participative way of working. It was clear from the open ended questionnaire responses that respondents sensed this change was occurring. Many respondents expressed unhappiness with this change in policy. The following comment from a questionnaire respondent expresses a concern that initial successes in TQM had not been sustained:

*"To some extent I believe we have lost our way with quality. We won the quality prize and it seems that after that we would simply continue along with quality. It has not happened that way and it seems we have lost some direction."*

In terms of having a culture supportive of the quality management approach this research identified organisation 2 (see Table 2) as having the "best" overall profile. There was a particularly strong belief from respondents that the approach would yield effective results for the company and benefits for themselves. A number of interviews carried out in this organisation supported this evaluation. Quality was led by company director who had an in-depth knowledge of quality and was active in the quality movement as a quality awards evaluator. This company, like company 14, had won an Australian quality award. However, unlike company 14 it had pursued the TQM approach and developed related expertise. The company was able to integrate its ISO 9000 activities into their quality program and was also integrating data collection for ISO 9000 with requirements for the environmental standard ISO 14000. It was clear that there was not an excessive focus on paperwork and bureaucracy that in some of the other participating companies seemed to clog their up their quality programs. Comments from respondents did not suggest the company was perfect and without problems in the area of quality but they were generally supportive and recognised the benefits of the approach e.g.:

*"Quality programs can easily become fly-by-night affairs. My company has successfully made TQM part of the culture which, in fact, has increased my loyalty and support for the organisation."*

According to Zbaracki [30] in the initial stages of a change program "rhetoric" can be effective in raising interest in a change program. However with time employees expect to see action – behaviours that support the program rhetoric. If they do not, then they are likely to be sceptical of management's intentions. If this notion is correct then program enthusiasm needs to be interpreted in terms of program maturity. The results for organisations 2 and 14 are not inconsistent with this theory. Organisation 14 has a long record of doing quality but is not delivering what has been promised, hence the "punishing" evaluations. Organisation 2 seems to have delivered on its program promises. The early rhetoric about quality has been supported by appropriate action.

## CONCLUSION

This paper presents a middle management view on quality. Arising from their role in organisations, middle managers often link between top management and lower level employees. They are therefore in a good position to comment critically on interventions such as quality programs.

Generally, the results correspond with published research. This has identified factors, such as the role of top management, that are important for the success of a quality program. The data suggests that the situation is complex and many variables may influence outcomes. It is difficult to capture and begin to understand the complexity without some in-depth knowledge of the culture and history of an organisation. This suggests the benefit of longitudinal research and the use of cases as well as questionnaire surveys. Using a cultural framework for analysis does seem to have benefits.

Some limitations of the research need be acknowledged. No measure was made of business or financial success of participating organisations and the sample may not be representative of Australian organisations more generally.

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We are pleased to inform you that your paper has been provisionally accepted for presentation at the forthcoming symposium in the refereed stream. To date we have only received one review, we will forward the second if and when we receive it.

The reviewer has recommended acceptance subject to revisions. The one reviewer report and recommendations are attached.

In order for your paper to be finally accepted, we ask that you complete the following steps:

Submit revised paper in correct format (see website for details) by May 1st 2006

Enclose a covering letter with your responses to the reviewers' comments  
The author or one of the authors of the paper must be registered by May 1st, early bird registration closes April 30th

If you require any assistance please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,

Lawrie and Arun



Reviewer 223-124.doc