Leadership in Quality – a middle management perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents middle managers' views about senior management support for quality programs in their

organisations. The data was collected from middle managers working in 21 Australian organisations with quality programs. Middle managers generally believed that top management support for the quality program influenced their own program commitment. There were considerable differences on middle managers evaluations of top management program support and communication effectiveness across participating organisations. Eight themes relating to middle managers' beliefs about top management support for quality are identified and discussed.

Introduction

This paper presents middle managers' views about key aspects of senior management support for quality programs in their organisations, in particular program commitment and program communication. Eight themes relating to middle managers' beliefs about top management support for quality are identified and discussed. The data was collected from middle managers working in 21 Australian organisations with quality programs. There is strong evidence that effective top management leadership is important for the success of all kinds of corporate change programs. A number of researchers have identified top management support as a key factor in the success of quality programs, of particular note is the work of Mann and Kehoe (1995) and Taylor and Wright (2003).

Middle managers are well placed to evaluate top management support for quality. In what could be described as their "traditional role" middle managers work closely with senior managers to understand their plans and implement them in the organisation. Increasingly, middle managers are being recognised for their contribution in other roles. For example they are becoming more involved in strategic decision making (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1990 & 1997) and entrepreneurial activities (Huy, 2001). King, Fowler and Zeithaml (2001) have recognised the unique organisational perspective that middle managers have to evaluate organisational competencies. There has been relatively little research into the experiences of middle managers involved in quality programs.

Literature Review

The organisations surveyed had ongoing TQM type programs and several of them also had obtained ISO 9000 certification. These two approaches to quality are explained briefly. Literature on top management support for quality and middle management is also reviewed.

Approaches to Quality

TQM and ISO 9000 are two of the most common formal approaches to quality. Arguably, the ideas of TQM that were developed and implemented in Japanese organisations, were first explained in a coherent way outside of Japan by Deming (1986). TQM is a broad approach to quality based on a number of principles including employee involvement in organisational change. Today this broad TQM approach is often implemented through the use of quality award frameworks. Australia has the Australian Business Excellence Framework, the

US has the "Baldrige" framework and in Europe there is the European Quality Award Framework (Evans and Lindsay, 2002). There are many other country branded frameworks. These frameworks are very similar and contain many ideas from the seminal work on by Deming (1986) 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. There is evidence that TQM programs have been in decline in recent years (Terziovski, Sohal and Moss,1999; Taylor and Wright, 2003)

The second common approach to quality is use of the ISO 9000 series of standards. A key marketing benefit of ISO 9000 is certification by an accredited external organisation. The series of standards was revised in 2000, to become ISO 9000:2000. The revisions were made partly in response to criticisms, particularly the reluctance of many users to adopt continuous improvement. The success of the revised standard seems unclear at present. ISO 9000:2000 focuses on processes and is arguably narrower in scope than TQM as described above. However the principles of the revised standard are very similar to those that underpin the quality award frameworks.

Top Management Program Support

Top management support is a factor that researchers have consistently identified as important for the success of a quality program (e.g. Wilkinson and Witcher, 1991; Dale and Cooper, 1994; Mann and Kehoe, 1995). Recent research by Taylor and Wright (2003) 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 them 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 needs to be led from the top. Leadership in quality 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 (1986) puts it "constancy of purpose". Several writers have highlighted the pressures on top management to achieve short-term goals, perhaps at the expense of maintaining a coherent long-term strategy based on TQM (e.g. Wilkinson and Witcher, 1991; Lawler, Mohrman and Ledford,1992).

Middle Managers

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 within their organisations 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 (Dopson and Stewart, 1993 & 1994). 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 (1995) argue that middle managers have together with top managers an important role in knowledge management in their organisations. Hilmer and Donaldson (1996) 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 (e.g. 1990 & 1997) have argued that middle managers role in decision making has increased. More recently, Blumentritt and Hardie (2000) make a case for the importance of middle management in the knowledge focused service organisation and Hornsby, Kuratko and Zahra (2002) recognise that middle managers have an important role in corporate entrepreneurship. An article presenting a positive account of the benefits middle managers can bring to an organisation has appeared in the influential Harvard Business Review (Huy, 2001). Some researchers suggest that middle managers are generally more satisfied with their jobs than in the 1980s (Fenton-O'Creevy, 1998). In contrast, a recent study in a number different European companies (Holden and Roberts, 2004) reports a complex and stressful work situation for many middle managers, which they argue can be described as depowerment. Factors contributing to this situation included; lacking adequate resources, having dual alliances to senior management and to those they managed, increasing scrutiny of their performance and high workloads. Although, complaining about high workload is a continuing theme in the middle management literature, dating back to at least to the seminal research of Rosemary Stewart (Stewart, 1967).

There appears to have been very little research that has addressed the view of middle managers involved in quality programs. What literature there is supports the notion that effective involvement of middle manages is important for the success of quality programs (Wilkinson and Witcher, 1991; Bardoel and Sohal, 1999). 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.

Methodology

The data used here are from a larger study on the beliefs and attitudes of middle managers towards quality programs in their organisations.

The design of the study drew on a number of areas of theory to identify factors that were likely to influence middle managers attitudes towards their quality programs. Ideas from attitude researchers such as Ajzen (1988)

were used to help understand how attitudes are formed. This literature suggest that that the beliefs that a middle manager has about top management support for quality will influence his or her attitude towards the program; positive beliefs contributing to positive attitudes. This position assumes that middle mangers consider top managements' position on quality important. The beliefs that a middle manager has about top management support may not be true. However, there seems to agreement in the attitude literature that it does not matter for attitude formation, whether or not a belief that is held by an individual is true or not.

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 TQM based with many incorporating ISO9000 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. Middle managers were defined as: "the broad group of people who occupy positions in between – in a hierarchical sense – first-line supervisors and senior management." Organisations identified their own middle managers within this broad definition. 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. 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. Qualitative data from the survey questionnaires and from interviews was transcribed and subjected to content analysis using the NUD*IST software.

Results

Profile of Respondents

Of the 562 questionnaire respondents 107 (19%) were female. Average age of respondents was 41 years, mean organisational tenure was relatively long at 12.6 years but tenure in current position was short at 2.9 years. A large proportion (78%) of respondents had received some formal training or education in quality.

Quantitative Results

Table 1 shows the results for middle managers evaluation of top management support for their quality program and top management quality program communication effectiveness. Middle managers were asked to evaluate how important the behaviours described by each item was in increasing their commitment to the quality program and also the extent to which they believed that these behaviours occurred in their organisation. The items used in the evaluations are shown at the foot of Table 1.

Table 1:   Importance and extent of top management support and top management communication for quality program

Company	N	Top management support [a] (means)		Top management communication [b] (means)	
		importance	extent	importance	extent
1	67	5.90	5.41	5.75	4.42
2	26	6.45	5.76	6.19	5.04
3	26	6.17	4.07	5.69	3.60
4	21	5.79	4.24	5.63	4.60
5	24	5.42	3.76	5.20	2.84
6	37	6.20	4.23	5.97	3.81
7	34	5.62	3.64	5.43	3.19
8	17	6.45	5.76	5.80	4.88
9	18	6.35	5.33	5.90	4.56
10	32	6.02	4.66	5.73	4.34
11	29	6.10	5.38	5.86	4.76
12	20	5.60	3.87	5.37	3.17
15	21	6.26	4.40	5.54	3.51
20	100	5.62	3.78	5.35	3.19
21	32	6.12	4.75	5.67	4.07
Total	**504**	**5.91**	**4.51**	**5.59**	**3.90**

Notes:

Importance scale: from 1 = not important to 7 = very important

Extent scale: (to what extent does this happen in your organisation?) from 1 = not at all to 7 = to a great extent.

For each respondent the mean score for the three commitment items and the mean score for the three communication items below were used to calculate the mean company scores in the table above.

[a] Items for top management support were:
- Top management in out organisation is committed to the quality program
- Top management in our organisation provides strong leadership in the quality program
- Top management's actions clearly show that they support the quality program

[b] Items for top management communication were:
- Top management keeps us informed of their plans regarding the quality program
- Top management provides useful feedback on how the quality program is going
- Top management makes it easy for me to communicate my feeling about the quality program to them

The quantitative data on top management program support and communication in Table 1 can be summarised as follows:

a)   Middle managers generally rated as high the importance of all six items related to top management program support and communication (see items at foot of Table 1).

b)   Mean ratings of importance of top management program support and communication were high across all of the participating organisations. Although there were some statistically significant differences (see "importance" columns in Table 1).

c)   Middle managers' beliefs about the extent of program support and communication varied considerably across organisations (see "extent" columns in Table 1). The ratings for organisations 1, 2 , 8 and 11 were particularly high.

d)   Middle managers had a general belief that top management program communication was less effective than the other aspects of top management support measured (compare "extent" columns for support and communications in Table 1). This belief was consistent across the fifteen organisations

that were compared.

Themes Relating to Top Management Support

The qualitative results were based on open-ended comments made on 285 of the returned questionnaires and on interviews with middle managers. Content analysis of this data revealed eight themes related to middle managements' views of top management program behaviour. In Table 2 each theme has been given a suitable label, and explanation of each theme is presented together with examples of middle managers' statements.

Table 2.   Themes relating to top management support

Theme	Explanation	Example
Resourcing quality	The provision of adequate resources – materials, time, training, implementing improvement projects etc	"Lack of support for TQM processes by way of funding to maintenance and capital projects forces a fire fighting existence which basically prevents forward movement to quality actions." (M.Mgr. Quest. 18.05) "Top management want the system, but want it for free." (M.Mgr. Int. 10)
Paying "lip service" to quality	Middle managers seem to judge support by action rather than words. Lip service is where the words are perceived as rhetoric and not matched by appropriate actions, e.g. provision of adequate resources.	"The most negative influence is hearing lip service from senior management but when it comes to action they are generally slack. Makes it difficult to keep staff focused and enthused" (M.Mgr. Quest. 10.28)
Constancy of purpose	Perception of top management's ability to maintain continuity of commitment to quality initiatives.	"Lack of real support by executives to foster TQM. We started off with a rush but now we need a new injection of enthusiasm" (M.Mgr. Quest. 5.24)
Chief Executive Officer support	Support for the program from the CEO or general manager.	"Quality at "company X" was strongest when "Y" was CEO. Since then it has withered on the vine". (M.Mgt. Quest. 20.79) "New general manager must state his commitment to quality initiatives currently underway, top management commitment to the program is vital" (M.Mgr. Quest. 6.04).
Differentiated support	A perception that top management support quality in some departments or areas of the organisation more than in others	"Top management support quality in T and D and purchasing but not sales or marketing" (M.Mgr. Int. 10)
Forcing quality	A perception that quality has been imposed on the organisation by top management, without adequate consultation	"I have seen too many elements of this organisation take on quality programs for the sake of taking them on or because they have been instructed to do so..." (M.Mgr. Quest. 15.03) "Constructive criticism of the program won't be tolerated." (M.Mgr. Quest. 1.61)
Showcasing	A perception that the quality program is	"... We only do what we think customers will

| quality | being used excessively to create an external image for the public or customer consumption. | admire us for, image over real value." (M.Mgr. Quest. 20.06) |
| Self interest/self promotion | A belief that management generally or perhaps some individual senior managers use the quality program in a divisive way for their own gain. | "Executive management only accepts quality initiatives if they suit their personal agenda. Staff try hard and are committed to TQM principles but only receive support and recognition when it suits senior management." (M.Mgr. Quest. 20.72) |

Notes: M. Mgr = middle manager; Quest. = questionnaire data; Int. = interview data

Discussion

The results support the view in the literature that top management support is a vital component in the success of a broad based quality program such as TQM (see Table 1). Middle managers across all of the participating organisations generally gave high scores for the importance of top management program support in influencing their own commitment to their organisations' quality programs.

In contrast to the high importance scores given across participating organisations middle managers' beliefs about the extent of top management program support varied significantly across organisations. It is clear that only a small number of the participating organisations have, in the eyes of their middle managers, a top management that is highly committed to their organisation's quality program. Program communication effectiveness was scored relatively poorly across organisations. One issue of particular concern to middle mangers was the lack of feedback to indicate if the program was, or was not, cost effective.

The qualitative data provides an insight into the ways in which middle managers may form their beliefs regarding the extent of program support from top management. An analysis of this data identified eight themes related to middle managers values and beliefs about top management behaviour with respect to quality in their organisations (see Table 2). It is apparent from the data collected that middle managers are astute observers of top management's behaviour with respect to their quality programs. Balogun (2003) in UK based research observed that middle managers frequently exchange stories and gossip, often centred on the behaviour of others, and in particular the behaviour of and comments of senior individuals. Some of the themes identified will now be discussed.

Resourcing Quality

Sohal, Samson and Ramsay (1998) identified two aspects of program resourcing as particularly important. Firstly, that quality programs have to compete with other initiatives for scarce resources and secondly that quality improvement activities may be see as additions to the normal working loads of supervisors and managers. Resourcing, seen more broadly, could include the provision of what Fenton-O'Creevy (1998) describes as "power tools". Power tools, which include provision of relevant information, control of resources

and authority to influence decisions in the organisation was found by Fenton-O'Creevy to be a significant factor in middle managers' resistance to employee involvement programs. As organisations become leaner it is likely that resourcing will become more of an issue for middle managers. Holden and Roberts (2004) identified having to do more with less as being a stress inducing factor for middle mangers. In the present research there was a considerable number of comments about the excessive amount of "red tape" and bureaucracy associated with quality programs, especially ISO 9000. There was a general belief among middle managers that their quality program had or would result in increased workload. However, some middle mangers who had strong convictions about benefits from their quality programs did not consider the additional workload particularly undesirable.

Showcasing Quality

Most of the middle managers who mentioned "showcasing quality" did so in a negative way as described in Table 2 in the Results. This view suggests a belief by some middle mangers that their organisations are using the quality program excessively for public relations purposes, perhaps at the expense of more important quality related activities. The quality manager of organisation 3 took this seriously enough to decide not to enter his organisation for a quality award. However, as pointed out by Zbaracki (1998), who uses the same term, showcasing has a positive purpose. Zbaracki found in the organisations that he studied that management felt a need to tell their success stories outside their organisations. He found that these stories were often distorted emphasising successes. Zbaracki observed that for some employees the rhetoric of showcasing did not match their experience and, as comments on this issue from middle managers in the present research suggest, they grew sceptical. However Zbaracki (1998) also points out that rhetoric which he defines as - a stream of discourse used to construct, spread and sustain a set of assumptions about TQM - can serve a useful purpose in the implementation of a quality program. According to Zbaracki this management rhetoric can be particularly useful in the early stages of implementation but he points out that as employees gain an understanding of the substance of TQM they can begin to notice divergence between rhetoric and management action.

Constancy of Purpose

Deming (1986) stressed the importance of constancy of purpose to the success of TQM. Clearly, this is a difficult task for organisations. The results of this research showed that middle managers generally do not believe that their quality programs reduce their organisation short-term thinking and over-reaction to short-term pressures. However, within the organisations participating in this research there were some good examples of constancy of purpose. For example organisation 7 was embarking on a second quality program initiative hoping to improve on their initial efforts that had been in place for some years. It should be noted that even if an organisation changes it approach to management away from TQM it is likely that some cultural aspects of TQM will be incorporated into any "new" approach. Powell (1995) in his research on the

effectiveness of TQM as a business strategy found examples of organisations that did not consider themselves to be TQM organisations but seemed to operate in a TQM like way.

<u>CEO Support for Quality Program</u>

The qualitative results in particular demonstrate the importance of the stance that a CEO has towards a quality program. A change in CEO can also signal a change in policy that can impact on an organisation's quality program. Results from organisation 20 clearly showed that the previously well supported formal quality program, which had been promoted extensively as part of the organisation's corporate image, was in the process of being dismantled due to a change in policy led by a new CEO. This shows that a change of strategic direction, in this case moving away from a formal quality program, can happen relatively quickly with a change in CEO. This research did not focus to any great extent on the politics of change, but as Dawson (1994) points out internal politics is an important factor in forming or changing policy related to quality programs. However in the case of organisation 20 it is too simplistic to conclude from the information supplied by middle managers that the CEO was solely responsible for the change in policy. However this was a belief that many of the middle managers expressed through their comments on returned questionnaires.

It was also evident, particularly from discussions with some quality managers and senior managers that it is not easy to achieve uniform support for a quality program from all of the top management team in an organisation. As one quality manager put it *"The top management team say they understand quality but I think they have different views – not a common view. They are not leading enough in quality"* (Q.Mgr. Int. 3).

Conclusion

Due to the nature of the sample used in this research caution should be observed in generalising the results to other workplaces. Analysis of the data collected supports the notion that what a middle managers believes about top management support for quality can affect their own beliefs and program motivation. Top management program communication was an identified as in need of improvement. The research identified a particular need for better information to be provided on the cost effectiveness of quality initiatives. It was evident that even in organisations with a well-developed quality culture it is unlikely that all senior managers will be quality program converts. A natural reaction to a lack of program support from some senior managers might be that it is bad for the organisation. However, perhaps a degree of scepticism and questioning of the quality program is a healthy state of affairs and will help to ward of the dangers of groupthink.

This research confirms that middle managers are astute observers of top management behaviour. Dale and Cooper (1994) point out that executives should consider how they are going to demonstrate to people from all levels their commitment to TQM. This research should provide senior managers with some insight into the possible impact of their own behaviour on middle managers with respect to quality programs and perhaps

organisational change programs more generally.

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