

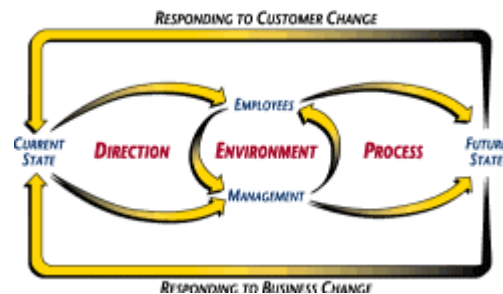
Catalyst for Change

Transforming Middle Managers into Change Agents

By Mark Samuel

Driven by global competition and the pursuit of customer satisfaction, total quality programs have flourished during the past 20 years. In the 1970's, quality circles initiated the quality movement. It was an elementary approach to quality which focused on analysis tools and processes, but it failed to provide the continuity which was necessary for creating a quality culture. In the 1980's, the quality movement advanced by integrating total quality with the organization's strategic business plan, assuring that total quality had a clear direction supported by top management who were committed to a philosophy of customer satisfaction and continuous improvement. Unfortunately, current total quality practices also have limitations.

While organizations have experienced tremendous improvements in quality service, few organizations have created the total quality "culture" necessary for sustaining total quality efforts. During the 1990's, it is imperative that organizations create the environment necessary to assure that total quality programs produce an organizational culture which involves all personnel at all levels (see model).



Middle Management - The Missing Piece in Creating a Total Quality Culture

The difference between success and failure, most executives agree, is in recognizing that total quality is not a separate program to be used only when time permits, but a new way of leading and guiding operations. The foundation of a total quality culture is an environment where fear is eliminated, appropriate information flows freely at all levels, and continuous improvement is the focus of employees, teams and management.

Middle management has been viewed by many as a direct obstacle to creating an environment which supports total quality. Middle managers are seen as:

- Feeding territorial competition.
- Stifling information flow.
- Not developing and/or preparing employees for change
- Unwilling to take initiatives as their contribution to continuous improvement.
- Threatened by continuous improvement efforts.

These characteristics not only increase antagonism towards middle management, they also threaten the survival of total quality. Since 1980, U.S. companies have eliminated one in four middle management positions - leaving many middle managers searching for a relevant place in their organization.

However, middle management can play a critical role in creating and sustaining total quality as a way of life within an organization. It is through their leadership that the vision of upper management can be translated into a strategic operational direction, which guides the organization. It is with their dedication that the macro operational processes which support the various departments and employees are constantly improved. It is through their cooperation and teamwork that territorialism and fear are removed from the organization. And, it is with their guidance and assistance that new leaders are developed, and all employees are informed of, and prepared for, change.

Instead of removing or ignoring middle management, organizations must see their potential, define a value-added role as change agents responsible for the growth of total quality as a cultural norm, and provide them with development opportunities to fulfill their new responsibilities.

Turning middle managers into catalysts for a total quality culture requires the following steps:

- Clarify and understand middle management's new role.
- Provide middle management with a system of leadership as change agents.
- Apply an accountability-based approach to developing middle managers.

The Role of Middle Management

As the move to attain a total quality culture within an organization gains momentum, middle managers play a critical role in leading that effort. Their contribution for transforming a total quality program into a total quality culture is listed in Table 1, below.

Provide middle managers with a system to lead as change agents.

Transforming middle managers into change agents requires a systematic process, which dissolves traditional management boundaries and replaces them with an empowered and team-oriented state of accountability for organizational performance. This process involves five critical steps:

Step 1: Empowerment

Rather than playing it safe for fear of losing their jobs or the ramifications of making mistakes, middle managers need to decide as individuals and as a team to be self-empowered. Instead of waiting for upper management to define their role, middle managers must get together and define their leadership role consistent with making total quality a way of life in the organization. Ultimately, middle managers must become

accountable for the performance of the organization in satisfying customer needs and meeting organizational objectives.

Step 2: Creating a Common Vision of Excellence

Once middle managers have chosen to be self-empowered, it is necessary for them to articulate their leadership vision (with input from all of their internal and external customers) and the benefits that all of their customers, including their direct reports, employees, senior management, and the external customers, will receive. Their vision is then transformed into critical success factors, which describe key areas of performance that they require of themselves to be successful in satisfying their internal and external customers.

Their vision and critical success factors are not only the basis for making decisions as a cross-functional team, but are also the benchmark for measuring their effectiveness as leaders. It is their team vision and the resulting critical success factors that reflect organizational success, not the accomplishment of individual department goals.

Step 3: New Rules for Playing the Organizational Game

Most middle managers have been conditioned through traditional organizational norms to protect the interests of their own department or division, often at the cost of organizational success. This has left middle management fragmented and territorial, breeding fear and unhealthy competition among employees. Two new rules have been created to break down these territorial walls and bond the group together in pursuit of their vision: interlocking accountability and team representation.

Using interlocking accountability, each middle manager is accountable to one another for his performance, behavior and attitude in accordance with supporting their vision and critical success factors.

Table 1: Middle Management's Contribution to Creating a Total Quality Culture

Middle management lead the total quality program by:

- Operating as a cohesive cross-functional team with the common purpose of leading the organization in applying total quality principles and tools in order to accomplish the organization's vision and achieve customer satisfaction.
- Developing and fine-tuning interdepartmental operational processes, which eliminate wasted energy and support the efforts of their employees.
- Developing and implementing systems for monitoring, coaching, measuring, and rewarding the improvements and performance of teams and individuals who are contributing to customer satisfaction.
- Eliminating territorialism and fear within the organization through effective leadership, modeling, coaching and supporting.
- Championing the efforts made by all managers and employees.

- Instituting a continuous improvement process directed at the systems used by middle management.
- Assuring that information flows throughout the organization to enable managers and employees to solve problems and make changes, which reflect organizational improvements.
- Acquiring and distributing resources in a way which serves the organization as a whole, and which supports continued improvement of customer satisfaction organizational viability.
- Guiding and leading the organization through change.

Also, each middle manager is responsible for holding each other middle manager accountable for his actions, which impact the team. Therefore, if one middle manager breaks an agreement, he would be held accountable by another middle manager - not by running to a senior manager or by spreading rumors.

In the past, holding someone accountable meant "blaming" them. Using interlocking accountability means acknowledging a situation without judging the person, and supporting the person in becoming more effective the next time. While this does not mean doing the work for them, it does mean supporting them in accomplishing their own goals.

The other barrier to trust is misrepresentation. This occurs when rumors are spread, or when confidences are shared. Using team representation, each middle manager is responsible for accurately representing the ideas and decisions of his team to others outside of the team. This also means that each middle manager must accurately represent the needs and opinions of his direct reports to the middle management team, providing them with enough information to make effective decisions.

Using their "vision", along with interlocking accountability and team representation, middle managers can establish agreements among themselves to foster trust, deal with conflict, and to effectively share information in a timely manner. They will also be modeling for their direct reports the level of accountability, teamwork and initiative that they are promoting throughout the organization.

Step 4: Implementing a Continuous Improvement Process

Based on their assessment of critical success factors, middle managers can choose their own improvement projects to strengthen the quality of service provided to their internal and external customers. Generally, this includes improving their own operational teamwork, as well as improving operational systems which reduce crisis management, streamline working processes, and improve operational processes identified by their direct reports and employees.

As with all continuous improvement efforts, it is important for middle management to effectively apply the total quality analysis tools, and to measure their customer service effectiveness. It is also important to measure improvements, acknowledge success, and

report those successes to senior management and their employees. It is this concrete evidence of continuous improvement which will gain the trust and respect of the organization's senior management and employees.

Step 5: Developing and Retaining Peak Performers

After identifying and working towards a clear direction, the middle management team must identify and develop future leaders of the organization. Instead of being threatened by upcoming leaders, it must view its own success in terms of the degree of depth that it is creating for the organization. It must design a systematic development process which includes training, coaching and mentoring in order to assure that the highest levels of talent, creativity and performance remain inside the organization. Further, middle management must provide guidance and coaching to assure that all managers within the organization are coaching and developing their direct reports.

Applying an Accountability-Based Approach to Developing Middle Managers as Change Agents

It is clear that the challenge placed upon middle managers to be change agents requires greater development than what is typically offered by the skills and techniques taught in a traditional management development program. In fact, by only offering management skills, such as communication, managing conflict, and negotiation techniques, middle managers' development has been short-changed.

Middle managers need to develop systems of leadership which incorporate and integrate topics taught in traditional management development programs. They must also have access to systems for developing future leaders, systems for tracking the results of organizational continuous improvement efforts, systems for assessing customer satisfaction, and operational strategic planning systems. While these systems include the integration of coaching, negotiation, and communication skills, as well as problem-solving, decision-making and conflict management strategies, the focus of each system is on achieving specific measurable outcomes, not the development of the skill (which may or may not be used).

With middle managers being asked to apply traditional skills in completely new contexts, management educators are acknowledging the need to shift from traditional approaches to ones, which develop the manager's accountability. Accountability-based training emphasizes systems for producing specific business outcomes rather than simply acquiring skills. Organizations which are demanding that middle management become value-added personnel, increasing their accountability for attaining measurable outcomes, have provided their middle managers with accountability-based working sessions where the implementation of systems integrating a variety of skills are used for developing their abilities as change agents.

There are five components in accountability-based training that can be applied to developing middle managers as change agents:

1. Begin with a Philosophy and Commitment

As with total quality training, a management development program must begin with senior management's conviction of a new philosophy of managing and leading the organization with a consequential commitment to supporting a total quality environment. This level of commitment must be expressed by members of senior management and reinforced throughout the training program. Senior management must clearly state the outcomes they will demand of middle management's role at the conclusion of the training program. These outcomes should include middle management's role in total quality and their role as change agents.

2. Use an Outcome and Process-Driven System

Rather than the traditional management development approach of focusing on specific topics, an accountability-based approach (similar to a total quality process approach) focuses on specific outcomes along with the systems and processes, which will achieve the desired outcomes.

For example, one outcome could be to establish measurable indicators for, and improve the development of, future leaders. This could include creating the measurable criteria, and setting up an assessment system which may include input from a variety of sources, including customers, suppliers, and team mates. This might also include creating a total quality approach to performance management, and the implementation of a tracking, coaching and acknowledgement system for developing employees.

By the end of this style of program, middle management can be assessed by the number of future leaders who have been developed based on their measurable criteria.

3. Incorporate On-the-Job/Overtime Training

Any process or system may need some modification after initial implementation, based on the specific circumstances of its application; accountability is never attained until the implementation step. Therefore, accountability-based training is implemented over time so that implementation of a system can be tested, and the middle managers involved can be held accountable for their part in the implementation.

With this approach, managers can be assisted, step-by-step, as they implement one part of a process, come back to the session for course correction, and then implement the next part of a system. This not only sets up the accountability to take action, but also the support to implement the systems taught.

4. Use a Learning-by-Doing Approach

Instead of participating in a variety of role-playing exercises, case studies, or situational exercises, middle managers must use their actual workplace situations to apply the systems and tools taught in a program. For instance, in the previous example, middle managers would actually design and implement their system for

developing future leaders while in the training program, and then implement it with their direct reports. This way, no time is lost during the training program, and the middle managers leave each training session with the action steps mapped out for implementing the system.

Also, a learning-by-doing approach used on real-life situation in real-time assures the participants that the strategies taught are practical enough to be used back in the workplace.

5. Track, Measure, Acknowledge and Reward

Intermediate and final successes are tracked so that middle managers can be properly acknowledged at every step of implementation. This sets up a model of behavior, which will be expected of them. Most of their implementation steps involve the assistance of others in the organization, so that they get acknowledged at the same time, which further grounds the implementation of acknowledgement systems while the training is in process.

As in effective total quality efforts, middle managers complete a report of improvement at the conclusion of the accountability-based training program, acknowledging all participants in the improvement effort. It is then distributed to all parties affected, including senior management and employees. Based on the improvements achieved, the middle management team and individuals can be acknowledged in a way consistent with the new leadership norms established by the middle managers.

By the end of an accountability-based training program, middle managers will have demonstrated the ability to integrate the philosophy of total quality into their daily style of leadership. Managers will also have demonstrated the application of a new system for managing their daily responsibilities in a way, which is aligned with total quality. Managers will have demonstrated the use of total quality tools for increasing their effectiveness as leaders apart from their use in a total quality problem-solving team.

Finally, middle managers will have demonstrated increased skills as coaches, facilitators, troubleshooters, acknowledgers, and meeting leaders as they implement their leadership systems.

A Prescription for Developing Middle Managers as Change Agents

As senior management, first-line managers, and individual contributors have evolved during the growth of total quality, it is imperative that middle managers evolve so that they can fill their roles in making total quality a cultural reality within organizations. Without their involvement and support on a daily basis, total quality will have a hole in its process and will remain "another one of many programs".

However, just as total quality training has evolved throughout the years, so management development programs used for developing middle managers must assume the role of

change agents. Middle managers must be given the opportunity to empower themselves, supported with a team system which includes visioning, interlocking accountability and team representation to bond them as a team, and continuous improvement to wage an ongoing impact on the success of the organization. Finally, they must be given the skills to lead as change agents, based on an account-ability-based approach with assures them of measurable improvements and organizational success.

Instead of becoming obsolete, middle managers can become the change agents for creating a successful total quality culture.