

The Quality Diet: Building A Healthy Business

BY TIMOTHY J. FOLKERTS

Implementing a corporate quality system is much like dieting—and there's a lot more to both of these processes than you might think.

LET'S FACE IT: QUALITY IS NOT ALWAYS AN EASY SELL.

Explaining the principles and techniques to people outside the field can be challenging. Convincing management to invest in the effort can require considerable perseverance. Sacrificing the hard cash you'll get from today's shipment for future good will is the sort of delayed gratification businesses aren't always ready to accept. At every turn there is pressure to cut corners, hide problems, and just go along.

When facing such challenges, it is helpful to remember one simple analogy: Succeeding with quality improvement is like succeeding with a diet.

Quality Pros/Corporate Dietitians

Quality professionals could be called corporate dietitians—there to guide businesses to healthier lifestyles.

A poor diet leaves a person vulnerable. Carrying around extra weight makes everything just a little more difficult and time consuming. Chronic problems like diabetes are aggravated by obesity. Hidden problems like high cholesterol caused by too much saturated fat or high blood pressure caused by too much dietary sodium can lead to sudden, life-threatening heart attacks. Of course, better nutrition isn't a cure-all for these problems but it certainly can limit the risks.

Similarly, poor quality leaves a company vulnerable. Inefficient procedures and management make everything just a little more difficult and time consuming. Chronic cost overruns due to poor quality of incoming materials and supplies sap competitiveness. Hidden problems in the quality of outgoing products can lead to sudden, bankrupting product recalls or lawsuits. Better quality isn't a cure-all for these problems but it certainly limits the risks.

With people, survival of the fittest has been mitigated somewhat. We have tamed the world around us and eliminated many natural hazards. We have family and friends to support us when we are sick or weak.

The corporate world is not so forgiving. When times are good, it is possible for a poorly performing company to survive. When times are bad, the wolves will descend, culling many of the weak and inefficient.

Potential Gains

Many people don't realize that the primary purpose of a diet should not be to lose weight. Instead, the primary purpose should be to improve health. Weight loss is just a pleasant, visible side

effect. In fact, the original motivation for the diet could be something besides weight loss; it could be reducing sodium, fat, and cholesterol, for example. Concentrating simply on one facet of the diet can lead to poor nutrition—insufficient vitamins, minerals, or protein for proper health. Taken to an extreme, concentrating exclusively on weight loss can lead to anorexia—a life-threatening condition.

For a corporation, the primary goal of a quality improvement initiative is improved corporate health. A single-minded effort aimed at cutting costs won't do. Neither will efforts aimed solely at increasing quarterly profits, eliminating defects, or pushing more products out the door.

While costs, quarterly profits, defects, and production all are important, pursuing any one too aggressively will only lead to problems. Excessive cost-cutting will leave a company anemic. Relentless pursuit of short-term profits often simply delays problems, as Enron learned. Reducing defects significantly is often possible, but making the products perfect becomes cost-prohibitive. Raising production without improving or at least maintaining quality can lead to loss of customer loyalty and sales.

Quality is not just about reducing fat but also about improving the true viability of a company.

Choosing an Approach

The potential approaches to dieting and weight loss are almost limitless: low fat, low carb, vegetarian, replacing meals with diet shakes, skipping dessert, eating lots of grapefruit, using diet pills advertised on late-night television, proprietary programs like Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers, fasting, gastric surgery, and liposuction.

Many approaches can be quite effective at both weight loss and improved health, some are mildly helpful, but a few are actually dangerous. You can go it alone or join a group. You can sign up for a brand name plan or create your own. You can mix and match several different approaches. You can get advice from an expert or buy a book or simply jump on the latest bandwagon.

Ideally, a person interested in improved health should work with a dietitian or nutritionist to develop the right plan. The expert can ensure the diet will help achieve desired goals while still providing the balanced nutrition required to maintain health.

Similarly, a company interested in quality improvement ideally should use quality professionals to develop the plan that is right for that company, because quality improvement choices are

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as varied as diets: total quality management, plan-do-check or study-act, statistical process control, design of experiments, acceptance sampling, multi-vari plots, ISO 9001, TS 16949, lean, Six Sigma, lean Six Sigma, Dorian Shanin's Red X, W. Edwards Deming's 14 points, Joseph M. Juran's quality trilogy, and Philip Crosby's zero defects, to name several.

The right method, or combination of methods, will improve the viability of an organization by improving products and processes. The wrong approach could actually weaken an organization by diverting resources to the wrong problems.

Implementing the Plan

Even after a plan of attack has been chosen, success is still a long way off, and that success cannot be achieved by the dietitian. The dietitian can educate the client about nutrition issues. The dietitian can encourage the client to develop a support network. The dietitian can provide forms to track progress. The dietitian can applaud success and watch for backsliding. The dietitian can set up weekly or monthly meetings to provide in-person feedback.

Ultimately, though, no matter how well-crafted the plan, it won't succeed unless the client acts on the plan. The client needs to be committed to improved health.

Quality professionals face the same sort of challenge. Corporate leaders might say they want improvement but not carry through with appropriate action. It is important to educate and encourage. It is helpful to get suppliers and customers on board. It is valuable to track progress—anything to provide motivation and keep focused on the ultimate goals. The quality professional provides his or her support, but without leadership buy-in to quality improvement, it can't and won't happen.

Potential Pitfalls

Quality improvement and dieting can encounter similar pitfalls. Once you recognize the following five potential pitfalls, you improve your chances of overcoming them, allowing you to lead your organization to quality improvement and business health:

1. Lack of tact
2. Not understanding the system
3. Focusing on the short term
4. Yo-yo quality
5. False economy

Lack of tact: People don't like to be told they are fat, and bosses don't like to be told they are running a poor-quality operation.

With a receptive boss, a direct approach might work best but make sure you have a plan before you start pointing out problems. Even though a wise leader will acknowledge the truth and recognize that something must be done, he or she must be approached tactfully. Issues with suppliers or customers can often provide an opening to broach the subject.

At other times a stealth quality approach might be better. This is the equivalent of not telling your overweight spouse that you are now buying low-fat ground beef and diet desserts. After gains have been realized in small ways, the boss might be more receptive to learning about bigger improvement opportunities.

Not understanding the system: Weight Watchers uses a point system to monitor food intake. For example, one large apple is two points. If you aren't careful, it is easy to miscount points. If you make the mistake of counting one apple as one point several times, the diet will fail.

Similarly, small misunderstandings can lead to the failure of quality improvement initiatives. Whether it is miscalculation, miscommunication, miscalibration, or any number of other mistakes, quality plans have the potential to misfire if key ideas about the system are not understood.

Focusing on the short term: It is not uncommon to lose an unusually large amount of weight during the first week of a diet. This can set up unrealistic expectations and lead to later discouragement. It is also quite possible to stick faithfully to a plan, but see different amounts of weight loss each week. The dieter might be tempted to restrict calorie intake even more following a week of poor performance or to ease up after a week of exceptional performance.

Yo-yo quality: Many managers don't seem to have time to do things right the first time but they always seem to have time to fix things later. This is the equivalent of yo-yo dieting. You overeat and exercise too little for a couple months, and then you discover you've put on 20 pounds. For the next two months, you have to work three times as hard to lose those pounds and get back in shape. Maintaining steady progress all along is much easier overall than reacting to fix self-created problems.

False economy: Skipping lunch but

then eating three candy bars in the afternoon because you are starving is not effective for dieting. Bragging about all the lunches you've skipped won't change the fact that you are still gaining weight.

Similarly, cutting costs in one division but passing along equal or greater costs to other divisions is not a viable business plan. The manager or vice president of the cost-cutting division might be able to brag about improvements but the improvements don't prevent the business from losing more money than before.

Lasting Success

Quality can't be temporary. Quality can't be just a slogan. Quality can't be the job of just one person or one department. Quality can't be subordinate to today's production quotas.

Ultimately, success means a fundamental change in corporate lifestyle. As long as the mentality is, "We just need to do this until we reach our goals," or, "We just need to do this until the boss gets a new pet project," then failure is never far away.

So, the next time you have one minute to explain what quality professionals do, tell them you are the corporate dietitian. You have the plans to make the company healthier by eliminating poor habits that sap profits. You champion improvements that make everyone look better. You study and educate and encourage and implement to make those improvements a reality. And you would be happy to share that knowledge with them anytime they want to know more.

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