

# Corporate Culture and the Quality Organization

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James W. Fairfield-Sonn

*Foreword by Lawrence K. Williams*

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# Corporate Culture and the Quality Organization

Dedicated to my wife, Lynn, and  
children, Anne, James, and John

# Foreword

A German philosopher concluded an extremely long letter by apologizing for its length and explaining that he did not know enough about the subject to write a short letter. Jim Fairfield-Sonn has written a short and concise book, and clearly he understands the subject matter: corporate culture and quality improvement.

The early chapters of the book explain organizational culture in a manner that is understandable to all of its intended audiences. I wish very much that it had been available many years ago when, as a consultant, I was shown a memo by a potential client who had received a directive from his chief executive officer (CEO). The CEO had returned from a two-day retreat at a fancy resort and had requested that the personnel department have a strong culture in place by the end of the fiscal year!

The author does an effective job of tracing the use of culture as an organizational concept from the writings of Peters and Waterman (1982) to more contemporary uses, particularly in the case of mergers and acquisitions. Chapter 2 is an equally good read for students of organizational behavior, CEOs, or members of their boards. While many authors use culture as an explanatory variable, few provide help in measuring or evaluating culture. Fairfield-Sonn's discussion on measuring culture and cul-

tural differences is one of the very solid contributions of this book.

The various approaches to continuous quality improvement are quite thoroughly examined. Most interesting is the thoughtful overview of the gurus of quality improvement: Deming, Juran, and Crosby. Most contemporary authors give these pioneers short shrift but, as Fairfield-Sonn points out, they anticipated most of the problems that have arisen and the solutions that are in place today. Perhaps their biggest failing was their somewhat heavy-handed proscriptions and prescriptions. The book also contains an up-to-date discussion of the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Awards. The most recent changes in criteria for allocating the awards are noted. The new emphasis on bottom-line results should mute some of the criticisms of this program.

Several of the chapters in Part II, "Making Quality Happen," benefit from case descriptions that are taken from Fairfield-Sonn's 20 years of consulting practice. The cases come from different industries and from both the private and nonprofit sectors. There are vignettes from such giants as General Electric and Fidelity Investments, as well as from some very much smaller firms. The description of continuous quality improvement at Connecticut Renaissance, which provides drug rehabilitation services, adds a very distinctive touch to this book.

The chapter on rewarding performance undoubtedly contains one of the most vital messages in the book for any organization that is planning a quality improvement program. Citing Steve Kerr's 1975 article, "On the Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B," Fairfield-Sonn provides examples from his own and others experiences that demonstrate the importance of continuous, top-level involvement and a comprehensive reward system that reinforces the vision of long-range, continuous improvement.

As the author points out, with so many American firms focused almost solely on the next quarter, it is not an accident that Japanese firms, with their extended view of the future, were pioneers in the area of continuous quality improvement.

Jim Fairfield-Sonn has been a very successful consultant in addition to being an effective and popular professor. Jim's suc-

cess in both endeavors is due, in part, to his self-effacing manner that allows the student and the client to take full credit for their accomplishments. This same unassuming manner comes through in the text in a very pleasant way. This book involves the author as observer and stays away from the ego-inflating stories that get in the way of so many of the volumes in this general topic area. I am delighted that Jim, a former student, asked me to write this foreword. This is truly a book I wish I had written.

Lawrence K. Williams,  
Professor Emeritus,  
Cornell University,  
Ithaca, New York

# Preface

It has been known for some time that the quality of products and services offered by a firm is one of the best predictors of long-term organizational performance. Given this fact, it would make sense for continuous quality improvement to be one of the top priorities of all organizations. Yet, in reality, we know that firms vary widely in the level of quality that they aspire to offer to their customers as well as how well they deliver on whatever promises they make.

Why do some firms provide higher-quality goods and services than others? Many thoughts have been offered over the years. In studying firms that have consistently improved their quality over time, however, common patterns emerge. In other words, improving quality is not a mysterious process. Rather, the success of these companies can be traced back to a set of disciplined activities that they routinely engage in and work hard at doing well, albeit in somewhat different ways. These disciplined activities allow them to gain a competitive edge.

The aim of this book is to identify and illustrate those core activities that are repeatedly associated with successful quality improvement efforts. Given its intent, this book is different from most others in the field in three important respects. First, the goal

here is neither to explore one quality improvement method in great depth nor to provide a comprehensive list of the many ways that firms have attempted to improve quality. These approaches are already well represented in the literature. Instead, here attention is directed only at a carefully selected set of quality drivers consistently seen across a wide spectrum of firms. In this way, regardless of the industry that readers work in, they will benefit from understanding where and how the greatest gain from investments in quality are likely to be realized.

Second, most books in the quality field emphasize the tools and techniques for bringing about a technical change. While these tools and techniques are critical to the success of the effort, the emphasis in this book is on understanding why bringing about a cultural change is even more important. The reason for this emphasis is simple. Experience in the field has convinced the author that once a continuous improvement culture has been established, it is relatively easy to teach the tools and techniques to make quality improvements. On the other hand, if the culture is not supportive of the effort, then training in the tools and techniques is a waste of time and money.

Third, while there are many important ingredients in the recipe for success, there are also more and less effective ways to approach the change effort. In other words, not just the ingredients but also how they are added to the batter determine how well the cake will look and taste. For example, beginning the quality journey by training employees on how to improve their work processes and then expecting it to just happen will lead to a disappointing end product. Rather, significant quality improvement will come only after the senior management team has established a sound platform for the whole organization to move forward on a strategic quality improvement agenda. Then, the senior management team must consciously allocate resources to make it happen as well as visibly support the development of a disciplined approach to making quality improvement a way of life for everyone in the organization.

## AUDIENCES

This book is aimed at three primary audiences: executives who are responsible for improving the quality of the products and services offered by their firm; external and internal consultants who are actively involved in helping others to improve their work systems, processes, and procedures; and academics and students who are interested in learning more about how others have been able to improve the quality of the goods and services that they deliver. While each of these audiences brings a different perspective and set of questions to the book, they will all benefit from seeing in the end that continuous quality improvement is as much about creating a supportive quality culture within an organization as learning how to appropriately use a growing set of quality improvement tools and techniques.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENT

This book is organized in three parts. Part I provides a broad overview on how to start thinking about creating a quality organization. The discussion begins by asking the critical question, How much quality is enough? The answer to that question leads into a discussion of why and how quality standards have evolved and where they are headed in the future. Then, attention is directed at explaining why creating a supportive culture is so important to the success of a continuous quality improvement effort. This Part concludes with a review of how to create a foundation for an integrated quality improvement effort and how the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award program can help firms to get started on, or enhance their efforts along, the quality journey.

Part II explores how to drive a quality improvement effort into an organization, the first key task being to make quality improvement a key strategic priority. Next, some ideas are presented on how to make a firm more customer-focused. Then, a general outline is provided for how to structure the rollout of a formal quality improvement program. The last two chapters in this Part suggest ways to enhance employee involvement in the quality effort by aligning their long-term professional and per-

sonal development needs with participation in the program as well as ensuring that short-term recognition and rewards are provided.

Part III examines a number of emerging quality issues. Specifically, Chapter 9 takes a closer look at how some firms are now proactively taking steps to foster a richer learning environment within the firm as well as pursuing partnerships with other organizations as a way to improve the quality of their own products and services. Chapter 10 looks at the implications stemming from the drive toward six sigma levels of quality and what new opportunities are being made available from advances in information technology. The book concludes with a summary of the lessons learned and an invitation to others to join or rejoin the quality journey.

# Acknowledgments

Writing this book has been a collaborative effort. Without the insights gained and helpful feedback received from many clients, colleagues, and students in my seminar on process and project management this book would not have become a reality. Thus, I want to begin by expressing my appreciation to everyone who has been involved in shaping the ideas contained here.

As often happens, however, some individuals make greater contributions than others. Accordingly, I would like to identify a number of individuals who were particularly helpful in bringing this work to completion. Some of these individuals have been invaluable in clarifying the general ideas presented in this book, and others made a major contribution by providing specific examples to demonstrate the potential of quality improvement efforts to enhance the competitiveness of organizations and the work lives of individuals. A third group of colleagues was instrumental in helping to improve the presentation of the ideas themselves.

In terms of clarifying the ideas presented here, I want to express particular appreciation to Paul Bacdayan, Paul Carpenter, Sheila Carmine, Mary Carsky, Steve Congden, Steve Darter, David Miller, Sandra Morgan, and Dick Raspa, who read and commented on drafts of this work. In addition, I want to recog-

nize the excellent research support provided by Josh Lowy, Bryant McConkie, and Pinkesh Patel whose tireless and enthusiastic efforts uncovered many illustrations of how quality concepts are being converted into useful applications across a wide range of industries.

A personal note of thanks also goes to several colleagues and friends who generously provided information for several of the in-depth case studies presented in the book. These contributors include Joel Becker, Chairman and CEO of Torrington Supply Company; Patrick McAuliffe, Executive Director, Connecticut Renaissance; and Laura Groark, Vice President, Fidelity Investments. All of their organizations embody many of the quality principles and practices described in this book. Working closely with, or observing, their organizations over the last several years as they move forward on the quality journey has been a source of great personal and professional pleasure and inspiration.

Third, I want to thank several individuals who graciously offered their time and talents to help enhance the presentation of the ideas in this book. In particular, special thanks go to Denise Eltouny of Yale University and Helmi Cotter at the University of Hartford as well as Lynn Taylor and Hilary Claggett at Greenwood Publishing.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to several individuals who helped me to get to this point in my career. Without their invaluable support at critical points in my professional development, I would not be writing this book at this time. Foremost among these individuals are Larry Williams, Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, who introduced me to the joys of doing field research; Allen Kraut, who while at IBM showed me how to rigorously apply theory to the solution of practical problems; and Clayton Alderfer, my dissertation chair at Yale's School of Organization and Management, who guided me through my first in-depth study of the influence of culture on organizational performance. Their help and inspiration have truly made a significant difference in my life and thinking, for which I will be forever grateful.

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