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Quality through Creative Innovation

The last century brought quality into the forefront of production. It was the key to competitiveness, growth and profitability. These forces drove companies to seek quality in their products, services, and processes. Quality was once the key to *staying ahead in business*; now, however, quality is becoming the key to *staying in business*. If a company would like to forge ahead of the competition, it will have to graduate from quality done *the standard way* to quality done *the innovative way*.

Standardizing Work

Standards are set as a way to increase quality, as well as to increase the reliability and efficiency of the work. The ISO 9000 series is based on the premise that standard ways of doing work ensure conformance to quality. Many organizations were focused on implementing these standards, as they were seen as a means to improve quality and obtain more business.

The problem with standardization of work is that these standards are often not followed. This is true even in Japan. In many other countries, certification of standardization is seen more as a means to gain access to business than as a tool to improve the quality of production.

Another drawback of standardizing work procedures is that, once the standards are set, they provide little opportunity for process improvement. Once the standard work procedure is set and is strictly enforced; employees are not allowed to follow different procedures. The assumption is that the standard procedure is the best procedure.

In many cases, the employee is told of the standard way of doing the work but he or she is not told of the reasons for or aims of the work he/she is doing. As a result, the employee does not share a sense of responsibility with the work. He or she might follow the standard but will not feel responsible if the output does not conform to quality.

Standards in work are set at three levels.

1. *Aims of the work.* Every company has its own goals. These should be appealing, useful, and challenging. Often, the goal of the company can be profit or wealth creation. An employee joining the company does in a sense approve of the company's goals. However, a company that exists for only for itself cannot survive in the long run. At some point, this goal will fail to motivate the contributors. For a company to do well, it has to in some way contribute to the society. With employees' educational levels increasing, their involvement with the company and identification with its activities is also increasing. It is therefore important that the goals and aims of the work they do be acceptable to them. Goals that are appealing, useful, challenging and in some way beneficial to society give the employee a sense of goodness and bring out his/her best work. As a result, the quality of work is continually being enhanced.

TenStep Supplemental Paper

2. *Work Constraints.* Constraints are part of any organized and civilized activity. However, the work should provide enough freedom to the employee, so the restrictions should be minimal.
3. *Means and procedures for work.* This is probably where the impact of standardization is most questioned. Should the standard way of doing work be scrupulously adhered to? Standard procedures for doing work are advocated on the basis that the work to be done has been studied from all angles. It also implies that the means and procedures have been developed after careful consideration. Therefore, the best way of doing the work should be the standard work practice. However, there is not a general best for everyone. What is the best way for a right-handed person may not be so for a left-handed person. Employees have their unique traits and can excel only if allowed to develop their own best approach. Sports provide a perfect example of this fact.

If there were a best way to run a race, all Olympic participants would have mastered it and won Gold medals. Every sport has some basic actions that need to be learned. These can be learned from a coach or by observation. Nevertheless, they alone never make a sportsman world champion material. To excel, a sportsman must move beyond the basic actions learned. He or she will have to put in many hours of hard work and practice and develop a style that best suits his/her physical characteristics and mental traits. This is a continuous process, and to move towards excellence, he/she must be creative and innovative in his/her approach every day.

So, do standardized work procedures actually conflict with quality? Does setting standard work procedures actually inhibit creativity and innovation from the employee? Is this eliminating an important motivational factor for employees to do quality work?

Standard methods and procedures can be useful more as guides than as statutes. For one, manuals of the basic procedures can be given to novices and inexperienced employees to help them learn their jobs and adapt to them faster. However, once the basic training is complete, the employee should understand that these procedures are only basic guidelines, and he/she should develop practices that suit him/her best. There can also be a manual with some performance tips, but employees must be allowed to adopt or uniquely adapt them. Managers can play the important role of encouraging employees to be creative and innovative. This not only motivates the employee, but ultimately results in the company coming out with better quality.

Summary

A job that allows an employee to be creative and innovative is its own best motivator. It gives the employee a sense of responsibility and something to look forward to every day. For this, the employee should be in sync with the aims of the work and should have as few restrictions on doing the work as possible. Standards can best serve as basic guidelines to accomplishing the work and should not be statutory. The sense of freedom along with the sense of responsibility can be a potent combination to bring out quality work.