



TenStep Supplemental Paper

9 March 2003

Standardizing Work vs. Creativity and Innovation

People are happiest when they are able to spend time on enjoyable activities. For work to be more enjoyable, it must incorporate certain elements, such as creativity (the ability to do different things or do things differently), accomplishment (the satisfaction of completing an activity successfully) and sociality (the joy of belonging to a community). These three elements can motivate people to do better work.

Standardizing Work

Standards are set to increase the reliability and efficiency of work. The ISO 9000 series is based on the idea that standard rules for doing work ensure quality. Many organizations were initially enthusiastic about implementing these standards because they promised to improve quality and help the organization become more efficient.

The problem with standardization of work is that the standards are not always followed. This is true even in Japan. In many other countries, certification of standardization is seen more as window dressing and a marketing ploy than as a tool to actually improve the quality of production.

Another drawback to standardizing work procedures is that once the standards are set, it may seem that there is little room to make improvements. Once the standard work procedure is set and strictly enforced, employees are asked to follow them. The assumption is that the standard procedure is the best procedure.

In many cases, the employee is told about the standard way of performing the work, but not about the reasons for the standard. As a result, the employee may follow the procedure but probably will not feel much responsibility if the output does not conform to quality standards.

So, does the process of standardizing work procedures actually conflict with quality process improvements? Does the setting of standard work procedures inhibit creativity and innovation from the employee? These are problems that an organization must be aware of and strive to eliminate.

Standardizing Work Specifications and Procedures

Standards in work can be set at a number of levels, but work specifications and procedures are probably the most common. This is also where the impact of standardization needs to be most questioned. Standard procedures for doing work are advocated based on the belief that they have been developed after careful consideration of all parts of the work. Therefore, it must be the best way of doing the work and should be the standard work practice.

In many cases, the standards do represent the best practice available at the time. However, that does not mean they should not be questioned. First of all, it is very possible the standards were set without taking all of the potential possibilities into account. For instance, a simple standard work process might work well for a right-handed



TenStep Supplemental Paper

person, but may be very inefficient for a left-handed person. In the same way, all employees have their own unique traits and the “best practice” standards may not work most efficiently for everyone.

Second, even if your standard process remains very efficient, other changes are happening within the organization. Technological change, for instance, may turn a “best practice” into an obsolete and cumbersome rule.

Do We Still Need Standards?

Is there still a place for standards? Yes there is. For one thing, standards stating the basic procedures can be given to novices and inexperienced employees to help them more quickly learn and adapt to their jobs. Second, there is also usually a distinct advantage to having everyone carry out similar activities in a similar manner. However, people also need to have the flexibility to challenge the rules. If there is a mechanism for challenging the standards, people may come up with ways to improve upon them. They may be small incremental changes, or they may be more fundamental.

If changes are proposed, does that mean the standard is obsolete? No. New ideas should be incorporated into the old standards to make new standards that are more efficient and effective. Managers can play the important role of encouraging employees in being creative and innovative. This not only motivates the employee, but ultimately results in the company achieving better quality and more efficient operations. These gains are made through a combination of adherence to standards, and process improvements to the standards over time.

Conclusion

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 understand the purpose of their work and they should work under standard processes that are as flexible as possible. Standards in how you do your job are still important, but employees must have the ability to challenge the standard if they think they know of a better way of doing it. This sense of freedom, along with the sense of responsibility, can be a potent combination to bring out quality work within more and more efficient and effective work processes.