



TQM: an act of balance between contradictions

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the discussion of organisation and management by uncovering some embedded contradictions in total quality management (TQM).

Design/methodology/approach – Based on discussions of leadership, TQM and the demands of modern working life, three examples of embedded contradictions that organisations can be confronted with have been discussed: collectivism versus individualism, manipulation versus empowerment and standardization versus innovative learning.

Findings – One conclusion from this paper is that organisations, in a matter of complex navigation, need to find balance between these contradictions, something that can be a significant problem for many leaders and often seems to be handled in an instrumental manner.

Originality/value – Although these contradictions are a growing concern in TQM research, they are seldom discussed in management literature, and therefore need to be addressed.

Keywords Total quality management, Leadership, Quality management techniques

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

During the 1990s and 2000s many companies and organisations in the Nordic countries have worked with extensive organisational changes towards lean production, process organisation, customer focus and quality. This has given changed, and often contradicting, demands and expectations on leadership. Some of the contradicting demands come from the set of problems arising in the meeting between function and process (Ellström and Kock, 2003). Of course such tensions can also be found in “traditional organisations”, but are more accentuated in the lean process-oriented and team-based modern organisations. Moreover, some parts of the problems come from the modern management models themselves used by the companies and organisations in order to improve their performance. The models can have “hidden” contradictions in form of ambiguous strategies and discourses. The organisations and leaders therefore need to prioritise, balance and navigate to keep their business running. This paper discusses three examples of such contradictions embedded within the total quality management (TQM) concept: “collectivism versus individualism”, “manipulation versus empowerment” and “standardization versus innovative learning”. These contradictions are rarely discussed in popular management literature and often overseen in organisational praxis, perhaps due to a sometimes uncritical use of modern management models. This complex picture is however of growing concern in TQM research and related research fields. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to



contribute to a further discussion on the use of TQM in organizations and its implications for leaders. The discussion of three examples of embedded contradictions in TQM does not only concern TQM, it could also provide for fruitful debate of other management concepts and models as well.

Management concepts and models

TQM is one of the numerous forms of management models or concepts that emerged and took form during the 1980s and 1990s, maybe even the most commonly used concept during this period. Røvik (2000) argues that a management concept is not only a toolkit for “trouble shooting” and improving organisation efficiency, but can also be seen as a symbol giving the organisations higher credibility. He describes the development of management theories as pendulum movements over time returning to earlier recipes and suggests the metaphor “pendulum with glue”, arguing that new recipes contain complementing parts from old recipes. And that there are more similarities than differences existing between different recipes, even if there is an eager to emphasize the difference from the old thinking in effort to legitimise the new recipe.

Røvik (2000) further divides management concepts in two main approaches, i.e. rational instrumental and social-normative, that recur and relieve each other in a cyclical pattern. The social-normative approach focuses on the qualitative relationship between leaders and co-workers with a strategy to change the informal structures and social norms in areas such as motivation and communication. This could, for instance, be seen in many leader development programs performed during the 1980s. The rational-instrumental approach from about 1960 was based on controlling productivity through surveillance and improvement of methods, to a strategical design of the formal structures. This instrumental, tool-thinking approach is reflected in the training of practical and specific business abilities aimed at increasing efficiency. The recipe is valued exclusively by experiences of practical use, focusing on organisational, technical and economical results. During the 1990s, the rational-instrumental approach returned, now in the shape of rationalisation of operations through staff cuts and implementation of, for instance, business re-engineering focusing on radical improvements of customer value adding processes.

The changing shape and character of TQM

TQM's origin can be found in the writings of American quality experts, from the measuring and statistical area, such as Juran, Deming and Ishikawa, and its adoption and development by the Japanese manufacturing industry (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). TQM is based on Japanese experiences from the motor and electronics industries and may be seen as an American variety of the Japanese Toyota system. According to Hellsten and Klefsjö (2000), the aim of TQM of today is to increase external and internal customer satisfaction with a reduced consumption of resources. Hellsten and Klefsjö describe TQM as a continuously evolving management system consisting of:

- *values*: top management commitment, continuous improvement, decisions based on facts, letting everybody be committed, focus on processes and customers;
- *methodologies*: self-assessment, employee development, policy deployment; and
- *tools*: ISO 9000, tree diagrams, criteria of MBNQA, control charts, etc.

There exists today a multitude of concepts and tools that companies and public organisations can consider. TQM alone contains many different strategies, methodologies and tools. Companies and organisations seldom implement a concept verbatim, but select the part suitable to improve precisely their own operations, and adapt and modify the concept in the implementation (Røvik, 2000). They can also use parts of several concepts and tools simultaneously. This agrees with the TQM idea, though not unproblematic, since some aspects of parallel concepts seem to “collide” with parts of the TQM concept. The TQM concept is, however, also changeable and adaptable to the spirit of the time. TQM has also become to some extent an umbrella for several concepts and tools, for example six sigma, 5S, total productive maintenance (TPM) and balanced scorecard, i.e. TQM is present in many different varieties and interpretations. And, as we shall see, TQM contains some embedded contradictions and incompatible principles. This may not become visible until the concept meets “reality”, for example in connection with the organisational and the cultural change advocated by TQM. This is more seldom discussed and this paper focuses on three of these contradictions.

Three embedded contradictions

Collectivism versus individualism

TQM has, by tradition, a collective approach using quality circles and empowered team-based methodologies. However, the general trend during the first decade of the twenty-first century has been to focus more and more on creating a co-worker culture and individualisation. Riddarstråle and Nordström (2002), for instance, advocate an even more “funky” perspective through individualistic freedom to release competence and creativity in an effort adjust to the future and the globalized business and labour market.

But this gliding towards individualism appears to be largely unworkable and incompatible with the “original” TQM’s team-based philosophy and activities (Harrington, 1998; McKenna and Beech, 2002). When TQM was developed in the USA and Europe during the 1980s and 1990s, the concept was strongly influenced by the “Japanese wonder”. However, some explanation of the Japanese success and organisational culture may be found in a particular ideology. This is the ideology of loyalty to one lord as derived from the Japanese appropriation of Chinese “Confucian” principles and the feudal legacy (Wilkinson and Oliver, 1992). According to McKenna and Beech (2002), the “values at heart of the Japanese workers” are hard work and long hours spent at work, a great need to belong and not to be isolated from one’s community; avoidance or failure to discharge duties in accordance with normal social rules can bring shame, loss of face, and could result in isolation. In societies where collectivism prevails, such as in Japan, individuals function through groups and assume joint responsibility for the collective output.

Inspired by the Japanese management practice, Ouchi (1981), for example, described what he called “The Theory Z” for possible utilization in the USA. This theory is commented on by McKenna and Beech (2002) as: “a predominant concern for people; a guarantee of long-term employment; decision making based on shared values and collective responsibility; a ‘clan’ approach to participation, with strong pressure to encourage performance; high trust and faith in the managers’ ultimate judgment; and non-specialized career pathways.” Further, the end result was a “pledge of commitment to the organisation.” However, there could be an obstacle for western management attempting to transplant the Japanese management practices without adapting them to their particular circumstances in western culture (McKenna and Beech, 2002).

When TQM was introduced in Sweden in the 1980s, its collective approach was fairly well in line with the collective tradition of the Swedish labour market, even if it was a matter of different types of collective. The labour movement in Sweden was influential, and a law was enacted regarding participation in, for example, company boards. Issues of payment, employment conditions, and working environment were solved collectively. But in the 1990s this development changed and the unions' commitment to, and influence on, work environment research decreased (Johansson, 1999). This is also in accordance to Milkman(1998), who argues that there is an inextricable link between the collapse of union power in the 1980s and the trend towards individualisation in the USA. According to Wilkinson *et al.* (1998), an implicit unitarism also means that the customer-oriented goals of continuous improvement are asserted beyond question and that the market language is replacing the labour/union discussion.

According to, for instance, Lindgren (1999) and Fältholm (1998), a greater focus has been directed to the individuals in organisations in many management concepts including TQM. The issues involved are both production control and by controlling each individual, for example by means of individual pay setting, management by objectives and norms/organisational culture, and by individuals taking control and responsibility for, e.g. their own employability, health/working environment, pay development and competence development, career, education and training.

A too strong focus on "rank and file" individuals' performances may lead to stronger territorial thinking. Teamwork, advocated by TQM, is based on members complementing and sharing their knowledge and working together. However, the trend of increasing individualisation may in practice counteract teamwork and organisational learning. If knowledge and information become important for a person's own pay development and career, it may become difficult to share these loyally in competitions with others. Of note, the notion of "rank and file" over the employees and the rewarding of individual achievements was something that Deming (1986) strongly warned against. In his books and lectures, Deming argued in favour of win-win solutions and advocated equal pay. It was the work task in itself that should be the reward.

A highly individualized organisation can be hard to control traditionally and the control of its employees can take place at a deeper level and even more with the aid of attitudes, "ownership", mission, vision, organisational culture, and emotions (Oakland, 1989). This is also in accordance with what Kunde (1997) described as "brand religion", or with what Røvik (2000) is defining as the "social-normative" approach. For instance, Taylor (1998) considers the balanced scorecard as an aid to enhance managerial surveillance and control in the detail of employees. Advanced surveillance techniques may represent a low-trust strategy that risks alienating workers and undermining their genuine commitment to quality and continuous improvement.

Manipulation versus empowerment

The second contradiction somewhat implies that TQM moves in a twilight zone of manipulation and empowerment. This can be formulated as empowerment and detailed surveillance at the same time. TQM emphasises employee participation through empowerment and includes decentralised organisations and a redistribution of power. Ishikawa (1985), as one TQM advocator, suggests as much delegation as

possible to establish respect for humanity as part of the management philosophy. Oakland (1989) states: "TQM is concerned with moving the focus of control from outside the individual to within; the objective being to make everyone accountable for their own performance, and get them committed to attaining quality in a highly motivated fashion."

The aim is to motivate people to voluntarily make a deep commitment, so that they will act independently, though based on the interests defined by the organisation. Wilkinson *et al.* (1998) argue that: "A related problem is that in TQM continuous improvements are advocated in order to adapt to external customers' demands. The training can therefore be found over-simplistic and even patronising by the employees, with a tendency to present a too positive image of the organisation and with a condescending tone in the prescriptions offered."

In the end, internal customer needs may be seen as coming in "second place", of minor importance in comparison to external customer needs, and may compromise the effort of increased motivation.

Argyris (1998) argues that empowerment is only reinforced by internal commitment, which in turn is based on a person's own definition of and effort to perform her/his task. He further argues that there is an inner contradiction, as a destructive force, between management being in control and employees pushing for autonomy. The external commitment, such as contractual compliance, based on management control will undermine the empowerment idea and the credibility of top management (Argyris, 1998). Yet another part of empowerment and participation is that it does not, for obvious reasons, mean empowerment in all areas, but in specific areas defined by management.

The use of smaller teams in an effort to establish a unitary work force through internal relations and obligations within the teams is of course powerful, but can also be questioned. Drury (1997) argues that self-directed work teams can turn into the "tyranny of the workforce" by themselves. Argyris (1998) argues that empowerment often enters the realm of political correctness, and if change is challenged you may become an enemy of change.

TQM advocates a unanimous organisation behind the visions and values "sold in" by management, and proposes a deliberate influence on individual's values and attitudes in accordance with organisational requirements. One example is Dygert (2000), who states, "a team effort to achieve absolute and total commitment to develop a sense of ownership. New ideas must be sold by the management and visions must be shared". The best way, according to Dygert (2000), "is to involve the employees in as many of the organisations decisions as possible, since people will support what they help to create". The "everybody's participation" argued for in TQM, can also be seen as a commitment under an obligation, according to Røvik (2000).

One problem can be establishing absolute and total commitment within ethical boundaries, since the choices for individual co-workers are limited and the pressure for compliance from organisational needs can be hard. Consequently, a co-worker can end up in decision-making processes that are poorly supported by information or overview, with consequences they do not always understand, but all the same have to take responsibility for. Hackman and Wageman (1995) point out, "pseudo-participation is ill-advised, because people almost always are able to tell when they are being manipulated," and are therefore a risk to undermine management's credibility.

Thus, the rhetoric around TQM – this concept is criticised by Flood and Jackson (1991) for ideological control, manipulation and mistrust. However, leadership is, according to Bryman (1996), always more or less manipulative. There is a risk of a sense of manipulation in organisations emphasising motivation and attitude strategies, such as in TQM. This becomes extra problematic because the harmony and unitarist perspective often hide questions concerning power, conflicts and perhaps similarly difficult themes (Dale, 1999; Svensson, 1997; Røvik, 2000). There is a fundamental tension between empowerment, individual development and innovation versus and the requirement for conformance to tight behavioural specifications (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1998).

Pruijt (2000) has listed some general issues that may cause disharmony and employment discontent:

- The employment relation is subordination of the employee to the employer.
- The employee is more dependent on the employer than the employer is on the individual employee.
- The employee is instrumental in the accumulation of capital. There is a constant drive to reduce labour costs, to intensify the pressure of work, and to render existing workers redundant.

These issues often seem neglected in the discussion of the employer/employee relation.

Another part of the second contradiction is that TQM opens up an individuals' independence, freedom of action, and their own responsibility for personal development. TQM, in particular, advocates a general equality of everybody without privileges – leaders as well as co-workers, according to Ishikawa (1985). Most co-workers may consider this attractive and the form of organisation may therefore be said to be “seductive” to them. But it is no far cry from becoming “a greedy organisation” and functioning as the employer’s “ideal existence”, a system that can exploit the individual as much as possible, according to Lindgren (1999) and Rasmussen (1999). This can be an especially high risk in organisations with dwindling resources. Such a situation may create general obstacles to quality work, willingness to make changes, commitment, motivation for participation, and learning and innovative power – in other words the desired positive effects of modern organisations. The consequences for the individual may be greater responsibility without real influence on her/his work (Argyris, 1998). McCabe *et al.* (1998) also argue that American and European quality efforts are characterized by an intense workload, control, responsibility in front of management, surveillance and pressure from customers and colleagues. At the same time, the scope for recovering, reflection and learning may be reduced.

Standardisation versus innovative learning

TQM is very much an order of effectivisation, formalisation and standardisation of methods and work routines for the purpose of reducing variation (Imai, 1997; Eklund, 1997). This may be seen as a legacy from Walter Shewhart's statistical measuring inspections in the 1920s – through Deming's statistical quality control and views on the organisational systems in the 1980s (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). At the same time, ideas and thoughts of the individuals' learning at work, in cooperation and communication, and of “learning organisation”, play a central role in TQM. At least in

theory, TQM is built on competent, self-governed and innovatively thinking workers. Various different quality assurance systems are also advocated for, such as ISO 9000 standards, since they provide platforms to build upon and gradually carry the quality development forward. This standardisation and formalisation in the form of routines and rules may thus be a good way of assuring quality and creating conditions for learning and further development, according to, for example Imai (1997), but also as a reduction of uncertainty when it is possible to foresee the organisation's actions. Paradoxically, standardisation is one condition for learning, but may simultaneously function as a limitation of learning, flexibility and innovativeness.

A prerequisite for attaining development-oriented learning is to have an organisation with scope for questioning established routines, opportunities for reflection, and alternative thinking (Ellström, 2001). However, one part of the contradiction is that this may conflict with the high demands for productivity. Severe time pressure combined with a slimmed organisation with a high degree of standardisation may lead to a limited scope for the necessary dynamics and debate. Critics like Hackman and Wageman (1995) and Eklund (1997) argue that over-specification may lead to bureaucratization, loss of motivation and loss of autonomy. Cassidy (1996) also argues, "many organisations have abandoned TQM because of its bureaucracy and over-focusing on processes, cultural mismatch, and financial pressures".

Another part of the third contradiction is that TQM contains tools for initially "collecting" knowledge and skills from the co-workers and then establishing work routines for best practice. This is an important part of a learning organisation and is also recognisable in the thoughts of Knowledge Management (Sveriges Tekniska Attachée, 1999). It is emphasised that the company should decrease its dependence on individual knowledge. Like many other modern management concepts, TQM is "packaged" to be user friendly and saleable (Røvik, 2000). Dale (1999) has, for example, filled the book *Managing Quality* with various checklists. The problem is that this can simultaneously create some superficiality and simplifications. If companies use standardised questions in their surveys and evaluations, they only get a certain type of information – more or less about the same thing (Ellström, 2000). The selection of data or how it is collected will then gives conditions for "decisions based on facts", but these facts may be far from the facts and the objectivity they believed they were basing their decisions on. Some data may not even be possible to collect and measure through traditional surveys, i.e. there is a risk of lacking validity. The picture of the organisation gained from the standardised questions is also compared with a role model of how things should be. This, of course, conceals the great number of different complex circumstances that exist in all organisations. Quick fixes and easy ways out may also be seductive for leaders, giving them the illusion of doing the right things, but with poor valid support. The overlooked circumstances may be important forces strongly contributing to how and why an organisation develops in a certain direction and why unforeseen problems arise. Deming (1986) also warned about management by numbers and suggested that a better name would be "management by fear" when referring to merit ratings evaluations and appraisal systems. Peters and Waterman (1982) also claims that "what gets measured gets done". This means that people are more anxious to carry out things measured, but not necessarily the most important things, just more easily measured.

Conclusions

The main conclusion from this paper is that TQM has imbedded contradictions, for example “collectivism versus individualism”, “manipulation versus empowerment” and “standardisation versus innovative learning”. This complex picture is of growing concern in the TQM research field, but seems to be somewhat naïvely overseen in popular management literature. Consequently, unforeseen problems may arise and expected successes may never occur. In organisational praxis, the complexity caused by the embedded contradictions means that organisations and leaders have to prioritise, balance and navigate to keep the business running.

This paper has problematised TQM as one management concept among other concepts and ideas. The discussion has been mostly about the concept itself, not on the implementation and the use of the concept, i.e. the organisational praxis. Implementation of a management concept is a complex process and often means “translation” and adaptation of the concept. Although this adaptation and the fact that the concepts are most often not fully implemented, they are nevertheless important parts of the social constructions in local organisations. They play a dominant role in organisational praxis and how leaders and workers view the organisation and their own roles within the organisation. Therefore, it is important to discuss the content, the norms and messages in the management concepts.

This paper presents no easy solutions, but discusses three examples of embedded contradictions in a management concept, TQM, to illustrate implications for leaders in modern organisations. Without being aware of the contradictions it could be very tempting to just lean on the quick fixes and toolkits provided by management literature. Moreover, without an open debate and reflective open-minded discussions addressing established leadership approaches TQM and other concepts, may not improve in accordance with their own rhetoric. After all, continuous improvement is one core value of TQM.

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