Did You Give Up on Quality?

RANT

The world currently does not seem receptive to quality. Misspellings proliferate even in the established media. Profanity is ubiquitous as it meets no resistance. Grammar is ignored, often to the point of unintelligibility. The skill of objective argument to get to the truth of a matter is in decline. The concept of checking and double-checking to ensure the validity of a fact or statement is derided. The notion that precedent human endeavor, over previous years or possibly centuries, retains an essence of usefulness in addressing today's problems is discarded. Oh, and jeans are worn with rips not through poverty but in thrall to delusory fashion!

This is the backdrop to our cultural malaise and, just as people take their cues from the behavior of leaders, so do projects reflect the culture in which they swim.

NEVER NEVER NEVER GIVE UP

OK, now I've got that off my chest, what the heck is this post all about? It's about project quality and what it really means. Quality is misunderstood, tough to define, subject to 'sloganeering' by management, a victim of lip service, and its demands are unpopular. But if we can work it through to the essence, then it is worth the effort. Never give up.

THE ESSENCE

Here's the game we've played. Is quality describable using intrinsic characteristics and is therefore objective? Or is it subjective, only existing in the eye of the customer? Having worked with both approaches for decades, the verdict is in: subjective customer assessment can be a valid approach, but it is not quality. It is something else. Quality has to be intrinsic, measurable, and capable of meeting a quality specification and budget tradeoff. Anything else leads to a multi-dimensional view that makes definition even more painful, removes any hope of clarity, and enables 'window dressing' and posturing.

So now we are on the hook. We can't declare that fickle customer satisfaction is proof of quality. We can't rely on over-simplified extant quality definitions. We can't presume quality occurs when generic off-the-shelf quality methods are installed. Sorry, it is not that easy.

Unfortunately, because quality is intrinsic, discussion is only practical when we know the topic - be it a house, software, commercial product, service, project, process, event, meal, refinery, factory, road repair, dress, and the list goes on . . .

Whoa! Time to rein in a little. To avoid the bog, let's just explore two categories of interest to us as project managers. First, of course, is the quality of the project. And second, the quality of the (generic) product. As noted, product quality is hard to discuss meaningfully without proceeding to details; all I can do is postulate a general definition and leave it there, before returning to project quality.

PRODUCT QUALITY IS:

Hmmm. . . this only works if we stick to intrinsics and define EXACTLY what product quality factors contribute to the desired quality objective. My book discusses some techniques to achieve this, but for illustration I will let you consider just three uncontroversial and measurable objectives: durability (one factor is strength of materials), adherence to standards (one factor is certification), and freedom from defects (one factor is reuse of proven sub-assemblies). There are many more.

But what about features, customer appeal, value for money, exceeding expectations, and all that other complicated, multi-dimensional subjective stuff we have been told means quality? Though I contend that much of this is something other than product quality, there is an evident need for the product to meet customer requirements. Not doing so unambiguously lowers quality. It must be addressed, perhaps by a reference to Deming's 'fit for purpose' quality goal.

As a draft to work on, how about: Product quality is the *degree* (specified as part of the project) to which product *quality factors* (specified as part of the project) have been integrated into the product, and the extent to which the product meets its purpose (specified as part of the project and achieved through executing project quality factors).

SOME SPECIFICS

Test for Product Quality Sooner rather than Later

Faith-based approaches suggest that following the approved process will provide a quality result. Unfortunately, this never works as well as we think it should. Another problem is that the (usually) sturdy QC processes only cut-in when the product is almost built! Classic QA processes do occur throughout the project, but focus on process improvement not product validation. When quality is clearly accepted as an intrinsic feature of the product, then the logical approach - setting the requirements, design, and implementation of quality factors - can be part of the project design with huge gains in efficiency.

QA/QC are Add-Ons, not Intrinsic

As we know, QA/QC is supportive in nature and definitely has a role in projects, but QA/QC is not a demonstration that the ultimate goal of product quality will be achieved. Quality is not something to be added as a separate component. Quality is not a sprinkle of fairy dust.

Product quality must be built-in, and enabled by the PM who ensures *project* quality. Following our thesis based on intrinsics, not add-ons, what are the foundations on which project quality must be built? They exist on every project and I identify them as Objectives, Deliverables, Activities, and Tradeoffs.

Corporate Initiatives Disempower the PM

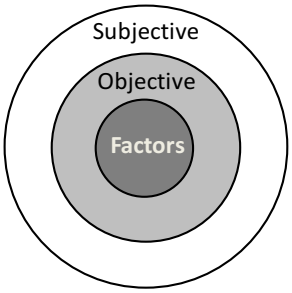
In the midst of the quality bubble, about 20 years ago, expensive top-down corporate initiatives became something of a fad. Some popular approaches in this category include ISO9000, Total Quality Management, Six Sigma, the SEI Capability Maturity Model, and independent Software Quality Assurance. They typically take the matter out of the PM's hands. The project is expected to participate in the quality initiative based on the corporate implementation.

The impression is that the company has 'taken care' of quality, but the PM is left as an implementer of add-ons and is effectively disempowered. Yes, many good methods and techniques might come with the corporate load, but they are supportive and not intrinsic.

THE TAKEAWAY

Here are all four of the project quality models that can reveal the quality factors operating on the foundations of the project. Quality will be intrinsic to the project if quality factors for the four basics - Objectives, Deliverables, Activities, and Tradeoffs – are identified and implemented.

Project Quality Model #1 – The Point

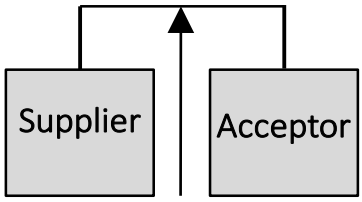


The purpose, or point, of pursuing *project* quality must be to ultimately secure the quality of the *product* itself. Therefore, the project must start with the discovery of product quality **Objectives**.

Because customers tend to consider quality primarily in subjective terms, the PM must ensure a shift from subjective to objective. Even this is an incomplete transition; objectives are usually only demonstrated when the product is largely finished, by which time it is too late. The model must therefore lead to a further decomposition of objectives into tangible product quality factors.

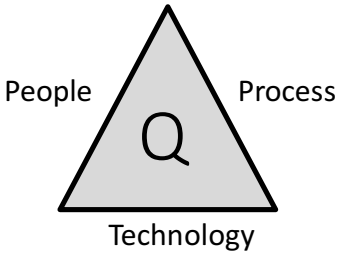
A product quality factor is defined as an observable feature of product design that promotes a product quality objective (ease of usage, ease of maintenance, adaptability, expandability, durability and etc.). Quality factors that support these objectives are evidence of product quality and may be graded as basic, standard, or superior.

Project Quality Model #2 - Duality



The conception of quality is purposeless without the role of a customer who has specified the need. Unfortunately, it is rare for a customer to properly fulfill this transactional role. There being two sides of every transaction, this is conceptualized as duality. There must be an equality of obligation and responsibility on both parties for approval of **Deliverables** and a good charter (or contract) will explain the protocols for a balanced transaction, especially final product acceptance. A good development methodology with built-in quality will also apply the duality model to interim project deliverables, such as specifications, designs, technical plans, components, subassemblies, and so forth.

Project Quality Model #3 - Quality Triangle

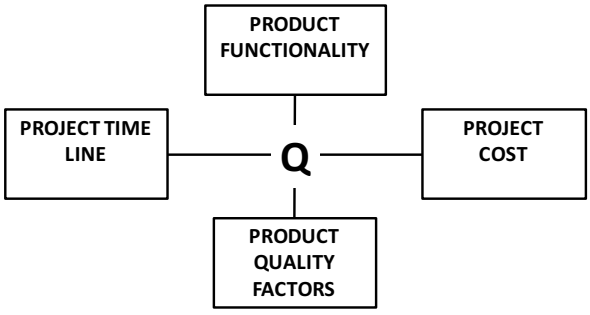


The Quality Triangle is an old but wise model, illustrating the three fundamentals that create quality: People, Process, and Technology (PPT). The quality movement has concentrated so much on process that the other two sides of the triangle are in danger of being forgotten. This model is a reminder and a powerful summation of the theoretical foundation for implementing quality.

In the context of project quality, the PM explicitly uses the model to optimize the **Activities** required to complete the project's deliverables. An important inclusion is the QA/QC PPT deployed on the project. They involve key project quality factors that contribute to product quality, though they are a demonstration of project quality, not necessarily product quality.

Project Quality Model #4 - Quality Quadrant

Tradeoffs are a fact of project life and start with an analysis of the triple constraint. The Quality Quadrant converts scope into a customer view of outcomes - product functionality and product quality factors.



The model facilitates discussion between the PM and sponsor by illustrating the issues involved in

the demand for 'faster, cheaper, better'. Specific tradeoff factors can be listed for each quadrant and tabled as prioritization checklists. These, coupled with other techniques such as alternatives analysis and contingency assessment, provide a base for methodical and effective negotiation to determine the quality specification. Depending upon the quality factors included, the overall product quality might be graded on a continuum but with three bands – basic, standard, or superior.

THE NEED FOR PM LEADERSHIP

Do you believe that PMs have lost control of project quality and are failing to provide leadership on quality? Quality initiatives rarely emerge from the bottom up, and top down corporate leadership has lost its way. Rethinking project quality in terms of quality factors, modelled by using the four project basics, brings control back to the PM. Using this approach requires little extra cost, and certainly no additional acquisitions requiring sponsor approval. Nonetheless, the PM may be advised to secure executive support for this approach, to provide authority when facing a reluctant stakeholder, or a non-compliant team member.

As project managers, we have no choice but to lead on quality. It is our job. However, the resultant quality of what we are building must be defined first, and that requires significant customer engagement.

Define quality as intrinsic to the product and thus dependent upon the nature of the product. Execute the project using the four quality models to ensure project quality. This will deliver a specified product quality consistent with customer needs and budget. Never give up.

Important note: The models summarized in this post are described in the book, and used in the book to support a suggested quality methodology based on established QMS thinking, adapted to a minimum cost vendor solution.

Robin's new book Commercial Project Management – A Guide for Selling and Delivering Professional Services published by Routledge is a complete exposé for the commercial environment. The complementary 2-day seminar, delivered in Robin's enthusiastic style, is packed with insider tips, techniques, and (mainly) true cautionary tales. Contact Robin at tmi@telus.net

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