

**Instituting Continuous Improvement
within a Tenure/Promotion Culture
(and taking advantage of it)**

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education have, in recent years, begun to formally instill principles of Total Quality Management into their existing cultures. Examples of these culture changes are numerous regarding administrative aspects of institutions; however, not as many examples are available in respect to introducing TQM concepts into the academic side of institutions. This may be due to the greater similarities that can be drawn between traditional corporations (that have been using TQM concepts for decades) and the administrative aspects of an institution of higher education as compared to those on the academic side. The administrative side has an ultimate goal of increasing student enrollments, retaining those that have been recruited and addressing concerns of overall satisfaction with various university services. The academic side, on the other hand, bears the greater part of any university's chief mission "to create and transfer knowledge."¹

Traditionally the academic side of an institution is guided by a tenure and promotion system. This system is, in many respects, vastly different from a basic corporation's approach to doing business. The tenure and promotion system helps faculty members to shape their ideas, priorities, and the general way they approach their job. The system generally revolves around faculty providing evidence of achievement in three areas: teaching; scholarly activity; and service in a professional capacity.

A faculty member's main goal therefore, is to understand what is expected in these three areas and to achieve what is expected so that tenure and promotions may be obtained. If basic TQM concepts are not tied to these three areas of achievement, then TQM will have difficulty taking root within the academic side of an institution. In other words, the tenure and promotion system of higher education plays a large role in defining the culture under which the academic side of higher education functions. Furthermore, once a culture is established it is very difficult to change within an organization.

Therefore, rather than changing this academic culture outright, TQM concepts (such as continuous improvement and assessment) should be implemented within the context of the existing culture as shaped by requirements of tenure and promotion. By tying these TQM concepts to the existing tenure and promotion requirements of teaching, research and service, faculty will be able to focus on them as a routine function and expectation for tenure and promotion.

In this paper TQM concepts will be defined. Then, examples of TQM practices that may already unknowingly exist within the tenure and promotion processes governing the academic side of many institutions of higher education will be explored. Finally, the authors will present their experiences at Purdue University Calumet in support of these examples.

I. Changing to a Total Quality Management Culture

It is human nature to resist change. There can be the fear of the unknown, a reluctance to change what has always worked in the past, or sometimes a general lack of willingness to add additional responsibilities to already over crowded schedules. Therefore, by incorporating TQM into existing requirements, less “change” may be perceived thereby creating a wider acceptance of TQM implementation.

At Purdue University the implementation of TQM began in the fall of 1995. This effort was dubbed “Excellence 21” and become known as the “Continuous Quality Improvement” (CQI) initiative. The primary goal of CQI is to facilitate an institution’s receptiveness to change. Purdue’s program was developed with assistance from Motorola University and was designed to give faculty, staff, and administrators the mindset and tools to enact continuous improvement without altering the core values or mission of the University. In particular, the objective is to overcome the artificial but natural barriers to change which are common to all institutions, and are exemplified by comments such as: “we’ve always done it this way”, “it can’t be done”, “they won’t let us do that” etc. It is within the spirit of CQI that no problem, no method, no program is exempt from examination and even the smallest improvements can generate a ripple effect that will spread out and influence the entire University.²

Whereas this effort has spread throughout the Purdue University system and to regional campuses, at the authors’ campus, Purdue University Calumet (PUC), it is still not formally a part of the academic side of the university. An effort dubbed “Exceeding Expectations = Quality” or “E²=Q” has been successfully initiated into the administrative functions at PUC, but no formal acceptance has been documented on the academic side. Implementation of a formal TQM initiation into the administrative functions of an institution currently appear more common place and better documented³ than initiation of TQM concepts into the academic side of an institution. This, as stated previously, may be due to the greater similarities that can be drawn between traditional corporations and the administrative aspects of an institution of higher education as compared to those on the academic side. Whatever the reason, change of any nature can be difficult at best.

Machiavelli once said, *‘there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the former has enemies in all who profit by the old order, and lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order.’* In light of this, unwilling participants within an organization may perceive a change as a ‘hidden agenda’ enclosed within. This can result in a negative cycle for participants who will then go through phases of denial, anger, fear, depression and finally acceptance, but only after exploring the change him/her self.

The more knowledge and input participants have into changes that affect their performance, the more they will take ownership for the successful implementation of those changes. Therefore, a first step toward changing the academic tenure/promotion culture so that it formally utilizes TQM concepts is to help faculty understand some of the benefits that TQM can provide. These benefits ultimately translate into the gaining of tenure and promotions. To begin this change an understanding of the TQM concepts themselves must first take place so that their application can then be integrated into the culture.

II. Total Quality Management Defined

The first step to implementing Total Quality Management (TQM) into any organization is to first understand the concept. However, TQM is a difficult concept to define outright. This is because it is not in itself one concept, but rather a management philosophy which dictates an organization's culture. This is why many U.S. organizations use the seven criteria set by the National Malcolm Baldrige Award to guide them in their initiation of TQM. The criteria set forth for this award is one of the best known for describing the major components of a TQM culture. The following descriptions are paraphrased from the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria.

- 1) Leadership – This requires that senior-level management be committed to the process of quality improvement. Organization leaders are expected to develop and sustain goals that support customer focus and quality values.
- 2) Information and Analysis – This requires that the organization use data and information to back quality excellence which, for the most part, means that data must be used to identify areas for improvement.
- 3) Strategic Quality Planning – This requires that an organization have key quality requirements integrated into the overall business plan, both short and long term.
- 4) Human Resource Development and Management – This requires that an organization must enable its workforce to develop to its fullest potential. It must do this through employee involvement, education, training and recognition.
- 5) Process Management – This requires that an organization have plans supporting continuous improvement (as quality excellence is an ongoing process).
- 6) Business Results – This requires an organization to track its performance and evaluate its trends.
- 7) Customer focus and Satisfaction – This requires that an organization understands its customers, evaluate their needs and ultimately utilize this information in improving their products, processes and services.

By viewing TQM through the Malcolm Baldrige Award criteria, the major pillars of TQM can be more readily identified as striving for excellence, continuous improvement, employee involvement, and customer focus. Unfortunately, TQM as a whole is often viewed by many

academics as an endeavor separate from the already demanding requirements for tenure and promotion. By breaking the concept of TQM down into these separate pillars, it is hoped that more academics will be able to view TQM as a support for their existing culture rather than a separate effort.

III. Existing Tenure and Promotion Criteria in Support of TQM

As in any successful organization, leadership is key and therefore also the first criterion for the Malcolm Baldrige award. It is the leaders who first define an organization's mission and goals and ultimately the customers it will serve. It is through these missions and goals that an organization can then define its success. It is often a misunderstood concept that adopting a TQM philosophy means that an organization must satisfy *everyone*. This is an impossible statement that can confuse and frustrate employees who are trying to support TQM principles. In reality a TQM philosophy endorses that there is a sincere attempt to satisfy those whom the organization deems its customers, not simply *everyone*. To this effect the leaders of the organization must have defined this in the organizations mission so that all efforts can properly focus on "the customer."

To illustrate this concept, Purdue University Calumet's mission statement specifies that it is dedicated to serving the people of Northwest Indiana and, to this effect, it has been established in Northwest Indiana as a commuter campus. Therefore, if out-of-state students were to request that dorm rooms be erected so that they could more conveniently utilize the campus, it would be perfectly legitimate for University administration to deny this request. This denial would not be a violation of the University's customer focus as their current mission involves serving the people of Northwest Indiana.

Every organization has limited resources and therefore can not satisfy all of the people all of the time. This is why a mission becomes the first and most important aspect in defining any organization's customer focus. Therefore, the foundation for any tenure and promotion activities should be based on the relevance of a faculty's teaching and scholarship efforts to support the university's mission and goals. For if their efforts support the mission, then it is logical that they are focusing on the intended customers of the university.

At Purdue University Calumet (PUC) the policies and procedures for tenure and promotion are documented into eight separate sections. The first four sections include an introduction, philosophy statement, process review and structure for the committees involved in the tenure/promotion process. These sections are set up to support the TQM concepts of leadership and customer focus. These four sections document that senior-level management within the institution are expected to sustain goals that support a customer focus and quality values. Most specifically, roles are defined for the senior faculty members and department head of the tenure/promotion candidate toward attaining the tenure/promotion. Some of these roles include mentoring and providing feedback to the candidate. These sections also define the role of the committees involved in the process with the major responsibility for scrutiny lying at the first level review (the departmental review). Purdue University Calumet's document specifically states:

Departmental committees are expected to review not only the quantity of scholarly activity but also to determine the relevance of the scholarship to the departmental and university mission.

This is, of course, a direct support of the TQM concepts of leadership and customer focus. The only effort a faculty member must put forth in support of this concept is in gaining an understanding of the university and department missions.

A second major TQM concept that these first four sections of the PUC tenure/promotion document support is the concept of Human Resource Development and Management (criterion 4 of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria). The tenure/promotion process as a whole has been designed to enable faculty members to develop to their fullest potential. One specific statement in the tenure policy regarding the review process is that “it is the responsibility of the administration to scrutinize the tenure/promotion process for evidence that it creates incentives which promote excellence.” This statement of administrative support, along with the numerous university employees involved in a faculty member’s attainment of tenure/promotion shows the extent to which employee involvement in support of quality output is important and utilized within the tenure/promotion system at PUC. Some faculty members may question the application of this concept and the extent to which it actually supports them in their attainment of tenure/promotion; however, it can not be disputed that the structure does exist at PUC. It is ultimately the responsibility of the faculty to make sure that they are aware of this intended support, make suggestions to help facilitate it, and take advantage of this existing structure.

IV. Continuous Improvement within a Tenure/Promotion Culture

The TQM concepts illustrated above (Leadership, customer focus and Human Resource Development and Management) should not require any additional effort by faculty members toward attaining tenure/promotion. The TQM concepts that affect faculty efforts directly are the concepts related to continuous improvement and assessment. In terms of the Malcolm Baldrige criteria these concepts involve information and analysis as well as process management. It is in these areas that most resistance to TQM by faculty is observed as these are viewed as additional requirements beyond current tenure/promotion requirements. These however, are actually TQM concepts that can be easily incorporated into the tenure/promotion process. It is application of these concepts that will aid faculty in providing exactly what is needed to prove themselves valuable members of the university therefore being deserving of tenure/promotion.

Concepts of continuous improvement and assessment have recently been gaining visibility through emphasis by national accrediting institutions such as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) as well as general regional educational accrediting institutions such as the North Central Association (NCA). These accrediting institutions are now specifically looking for continuous improvement plans and assessment programs as criteria for accreditation. Therefore, documentation of these efforts is already required at most institutions and should not be interpreted by faculty as additional documentation required for tenure/promotion in order to satisfy initiation of a TQM culture. Also, as these concepts gain visibility, institutions are adjusting current policies of operation to incorporate and highlight them. An example supporting the incorporation of continuous improvement into an existing

requirement at PUC is a change made in the process of documenting faculty annual reports in the Manufacturing Engineering Technologies and Supervision (METS) department. This change adjusted the traditional practice of preparing a faculty annual report which was based on simply listing the yearly activities undertaken in support of service, scholarship and teaching. The change required each faculty member to identify goals along with strategies for attaining them. The list of activities generated over the course of the year is then organized to support the strategies for attaining the goals. This adjusted format encourages faculty members to not only list their activities but also examine the purpose behind why each activity was accomplished. This change was a direct result of the development of a departmental continuous improvement plan for ABET.

Continuous Improvement and Assessment are natural next steps in TQM initiation once leaders develop a mission and customer focus for the organization. The continuous improvement philosophy focuses on improving processes to enable companies to give the customer what they want the first time, every time. This customer-focused, process-oriented approach to doing business results in increased satisfaction and delight for both customers and employees. Continuous improvement represents the ongoing, continuous commitment to improvement.⁴ Assessment, on the other hand, provides the information for analysis to quantify how well the processes are satisfying the customer needs and how well other quantifiable goals are being met.

At Purdue University Calumet, the last four sections of the policies and procedures for tenure and promotion document the actual criteria and processes involved in obtaining tenure. For example, specific types of documents are listed as being viable evidence for support of teaching effectiveness. Some of these include student, peer, and department head evaluations, redesigned curricula, and course development materials. All are documents that can be used for assessment of teaching. Likewise, viable documents for evidence of scholarship and service are listed. These types of documents should be starting points for benchmark assessments with continuous improvement being the natural follow-on activity to improve ones performance. The tenure process works if it is (in itself) an assessment to develop competent faculty to carryout the mission of the university. The evidence submitted must demonstrate a record of quality and continuous productivity.⁵

A recent example at PUC of a continuous improvement effort that supported excellence in teaching was the development and initiation of a "Curriculum update form." This form was developed by faculty of the METS department as an on-line computer form. The form allows all department members access to it at any time with the intention of it being filled out at the end of each semester to document any improvements made to courses in the department. This form therefore, provides a means for all department members to benefit from their peer's creative endeavors, provides recognition, and documents individual's continuous improvement efforts. This form has little impact in terms of effort exerted by faculty but goes a long way toward continuous improvement efforts. In addition the form requires the initiator to input a means of assessing the improvement. This provides a means to justify that the curriculum update was not simply a change but actually added value and improved the curriculum.

It is these type of opportunities that faculty should be taking advantage of, especially if they are striving for tenure/promotion. Faculty are the ones who created the new form at PUC, therefore

they made it as simple as possible for themselves to use. It supports the concept of continuous quality improvement while providing a means of quantifying the impact as well as documenting the entire process in support of proof towards excellence in teaching. In addition, the actual creation of the form can be viewed as a service function toward supporting the university in its efforts to instill CQI. It is efforts of this nature that the original founders of Excellence 21 encourage. They subscribe to the belief that continuous improvement, as a method of thinking, provides members of the University community with the unlimited opportunity to evaluate the way they respond to the people they serve.⁶

V. Conclusion

Although it is relatively common place now to implement TQM concepts on the administrative side of institutions of higher education, it is also important to implement TQM concepts on the academic side. The most prevalent way of doing this is by aiding faculty in gaining knowledge and understanding of how TQM concepts support their tenure and promotion activities. Also, to remind faculty that has attained tenure and promotion that it is this tenure and promotion system that has defined the culture in which they work. That without supporting basic TQM concepts the institution will fail to accomplish the continual challenge to make the best learning environment for the students and other stakeholders -- parents, employers, legislators, alumni, citizens -- who have placed their trust and futures in the hands of the institution.

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