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**BOUQUETS, BRICKBATS and BLINKERS: TOTAL QUALITY  
MANAGEMENT and EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT in PRACTICE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

To its advocates, TQM is unequivocally good and leads to the empowerment of employees and deservedly attracts bouquets. Alternatively, those from a labour process perspective hurl brickbats, arguing that it represents an intensification of work, shifting the frontier of control firmly in management's favour. We argue, however, that both of these perspectives are blinkered and the reality is more dependent on local circumstances and motives.

Descriptors: TQM, empowerment, industrial relations, control, labour process

**Wordcount: 9119 including references and titles**

## **BOUQUETS, BRICKBATS and BLINKERS: TQM and EI in PRACTICE<sup>1</sup>**

There is a basic ambiguity in Total Quality Management (TQM) in that, while managers seek the commitment and co-operation of their employees, increased control over the work process is a cornerstone of TQM. This ambiguity is reflected in the literature concerning TQM (Wilkinson A., 1992). Its advocates see it as universally beneficial, improving competitive advantage and, at the same time, 'empowering' the workforce as responsibility is delegated to those actually carrying out the task. This increased responsibility will foster pride, job satisfaction, and better work (Oakland, 1995:270). Its critics, however, point to the tighter managerial control involved in the drive to reduce variance (Parker and Slaughter, 1993) and the increased surveillance arising out of the quality measurement systems introduced (Delbridge et al, 1992; Sewell and Wilkinson B., 1992 a.b). From this latter perspective, TQM is seen as another development in the capitalist labour process intended to push back the frontiers of control and so intensify work.

A TQM system does, as the advocates are keen to point out, entail a devolution of responsibilities traditionally held by management to the level of team leader or operator; however, this does not lead to autonomy, rather an increasing (and increasingly taxing) set of tasks which are closely monitored and strictly controlled, such that subordination of the worker to the capitalist is more complete (Delbridge et al, 1992).

The contrasting perspectives lead to different conclusions - summarised in table 1 - being drawn from the same situation or set of 'facts'. This divergence is clearly demonstrated when the success story portrayed by Wickens (1987), the Personnel Director at Nissan (UK), is contrasted with the strong critique of the same factory by Garrahan and Stewart (1992).

<sup>1</sup>The paper draws on a current EPSRC-funded research project, 'TQM and the Human Resource Dimension' and has been developed out of a paper presented to the Employment Research Unit 1995 Conference, Cardiff Business School.

Wickens refers to the tripod of Nissan's success - flexibility, quality, and teamwork - in an atmosphere of consensus, commitment and trust. Garrahan and Stewart, however, consider 'tripod of subjugation' a more appropriate description. Flexibility equates with labour intensification, quality with increased control, and teamworking with peer surveillance.

We argue, however, that both the proponents and critics of TQM are being selective in their prescriptions and analysis, with the former focusing on the possibilities, the latter the pitfalls. In short, they are presenting a picture which is not so much wrong but partial.

**Table 1**

<b>Bouquets</b>	<b>Brickbats</b>
Education	Indoctrination
Empowerment	Emasculation
Liberating	Controlling
Delaying	Intensification
Teamwork	Peer group pressure
Responsibility	Surveillance
Post-Fordism	Neo-Fordism
Blame free culture	Identification of errors
Commitment	Compliance

### **What is TQM?**

Total quality management (TQM) has been described as a "hazy, ambiguous concept" (Dean and Bowen, 1994:394) and a "notoriously imprecise term" (Hill and Wilkinson A., 1995:9). TQM is a philosophy of management that can, perhaps, best be captured by its principles, practices and techniques. TQM is based on three fundamental principles (Hill and Wilkinson A., 1995):

**1. Customer orientation.** Quality means meeting customer requirements - and the orientation of quality management is to satisfy customers - both external and internal. This customer orientation provides a common goal for all organisational activities and members.

**2. Process orientation.** The activities performed within an organisation can be broken down into basic tasks or processes, which are linked in series, or 'quality chains', to form extended processes. Each process in the quality chain has a customer, stretching back from the external customer, through the various internal customers, to the organisation's suppliers.

**3. Continuous improvement.** Satisfying customer requirements involves the continuous improvement of products and processes. The most effective means of improvement is to use the people who actually do the job to identify and implement appropriate changes.

These principles of TQM are implemented using statistical process control (SPC) methods, process simplification, process re-engineering, measurement systems, self-inspection and teamworking in various forms. However, the manner in which employers implement TQM differs widely. Two broad approaches can be identified under the labels of 'hard' and 'soft' TQM, these categories identifying the main emphasis behind an organisation's TQM process. 'Hard' TQM concentrates on the tools and techniques and the systematic measurement and control of the work process, ensuring conformance to performance standards and the reduction of variability. It also tends to be associated with the BS5750 and ISO9000 series which are systems-based approaches to audit the policies and practices of organisations. 'Soft' TQM, on the other hand, places more importance on areas such as increasing the customer orientation of the organisation, training, teamwork, employee participation and culture change (Wilkinson A. et al, 1992). Obviously the two approaches are not mutually exclusive and an employer is likely to adopt features from both categories. However, the 'soft' and 'hard' labels do describe a difference in **emphasis** that is evident on the ground, one which has a significant effect on the level of discretion given to employees and the degree and nature of employee involvement.

### **The Nature of the Research Project**

The paper draws on a current EPSRC-funded research project, 'TQM and the Human Resource Dimension', which aims to explore the relationship between TQM and HR practices. The research is based on six manufacturing companies (at a total of nine sites) operating in Britain. The case study sites were chosen to reflect a diversity of organisational types - in terms of ownership (British, Japanese, French and American); establishment size (from 70 to 1000+); and product market conditions. They also vary in terms of quality management approach and development, though none would claim to be 'world class'. The research is being carried out using semi-structured interviews with senior and middle managers, with supervisors, and with employees and their union representatives. The interview findings are to be augmented by carrying out employee attitude surveys at the establishments, though the results from these are not yet available. Where possible, observations were also made of team meetings,

teambriefings, and training sessions. Documentary evidence, such as quality policies, personnel policies, and the results of earlier employee attitude surveys, were collected where appropriate. Given the many perspectives on total quality management initiatives that are likely to be present in any one organisation - and the complex nature of the interaction between these initiatives and factors such as industrial relations history, human resource policies, management style, and company culture - we would argue that methodological triangulation (Jick, 1979) is needed for analysts to achieve anything more than a partial perspective on employee involvement and TQM.

## **The Companies**

### **Eastco, Industrial**

Eastco is a multi-establishment company which, since a take-over in 1990, forms part of a Japanese-owned multi-national. The company manufactures bearings for automotive, aerospace and industrial use. The 'Industrial' site was opened in 1900 and was British owned until the take-over. There are 780 employees at this site, with another 1300 at the four other UK sites. This compares to a figure of 15,000 25 years ago, with the last round of redundancies occurring in 1993. The company experienced a severe recession in the early 1990s, with losses made in the first three years of the decade. However, an increase in orders, and production globalisation from Japan to the UK, has led to a dramatic increase in output and a recent return to profit. The company first embarked on TQM in the 1980s, but this was regarded as having failed due, management believed, to a half-hearted approach. A fresh attempt was made in 1991 which appears to have been more successful. The TQM initiative has the support of the unions and, after initial cynicism, growing support among the workforce. The shopfloor at Eastco is now organised into voluntary improvement teams which are both process based and cross-functional.

### **Eastco, Aerospace**

The Aerospace site has a very different culture to that of the Industrial site. There is opposition to the concept of TQM among employees, the unions, and sections of the management. It is seen as just another management fad that is irrelevant and unnecessary. Not surprisingly quality management success to date has been slower than at Industrial.

### **Westco**

Westco is part of an American owned company, with this site manufacturing products for the automotive industry. There are just over 600 employees on the site, of whom 400 are shopfloor workers. The site has experienced growing market demand which has led to significant recruitment in the past couple of years - 140 extra employees in 1994 alone. Cross-functional (voluntary) and cell-based (compulsory) teams are in place. There is general support for TQM from both the unions and the workforce.

### **Southco**

Southco UK has several sites in Britain, all of which have joined the company through acquisition. The site being studied was part of an American company but was then taken over by its new French parent in 1993. The site produces electrical distribution and control equipment, usually as one-offs or in small to medium batches. There are just over 400 employees at the site. The headcount was 750 seven years ago - the reduction in numbers being achieved by a combination of natural wastage and redundancies (both voluntary and compulsory). Southco is the only site involved in the research that is not unionised. Though the company's market is subject to demand fluctuations, the different demand patterns for the products have tended to even out into a fairly stable trading picture over the past few years. Southco have a long history of involvement in quality management, with the first steps being taken in 1972 when they moved from inspection to quality assurance. In 1983 they received BS 5750 part 1 approval (ISO9001 in 1989). In 1988 a concerted attempt was made to increase quality awareness by sending all employees on a two day off-site training programme, but this foundered due to a lack of training in the required tools and techniques. In 1991 cell-based continuous improvement teams were set up, and these largely self-managing teams have become the cornerstone of the TQM approach at Southco. The use of peer pressure has shifted the emphasis for day-to-day management from external control to self-control. There is strong support for teamworking among the workforce, and an often stated view that TQM would be more successful if group-level senior management were as committed to it as the workforce.

### **Boardco (Midlands)**

Boardco is a British owned company manufacturing corrugated packaging. The Midlands site employs approximately 250 people and manufactures heavy duty corrugated packaging. After a difficult period in the mid 1980s, the company has experienced reasonably strong growth, with a stable UK market share being augmented by growth in Europe. Increased output has been achieved through greater productivity with the number of employees staying roughly constant. The shopfloor workforce is



mostly male and semi-skilled. The quality management initiative was instigated by head office in the late 1980s, but was heavily associated with the quality department and became confused with the implementation of BS5750 (achieved in 1988). Since then the focus has shifted to being more of a company-wide concern with greater emphasis on the people issues. The directors felt, however, that TQM was seen by employees as being separate to their normal job and has therefore been replaced with the concept of 'business improvement - continuous improvement forming an integral part of everyone's work. This has been viewed by many employees as a de-prioritising of TQM. Employees are not formally structured into cell-based teams, though specific cross-functional teams are set up as required by management. There is opposition to teamworking from the shop stewards and doubts among the workforce about management's commitment to TQM.

### **Boardco (Scotland)**

The Scottish site specialises in post-print corrugated board. This is a relatively demanding technology but provides a higher quality product which, together with superior service, allows a premium price to be charged. The site is currently enjoying buoyant demand with turnover having doubled in the past five years, leading to a ten-fold increase in profits. Increased output has been achieved by new machinery, some improvement in processes and increased overtime working. There has, therefore, been only a minimal increase in employee numbers, with the current headcount standing at 170. The approach to TQM at Boardco, Scotland is significantly different to that at the Midlands site. The original impetus came from a visit by the production director to a factory in the USA which was operating with a strong teamworking culture. The main objective of TQM was described as creating an environment where employees wanted to work effectively. Emphasis is being placed on the 'soft' aspects of TQM and a deliberately low key approach has been adopted - for example mission or vision statements are not widely displayed and no title has been given to the TQM initiative. Management have taken a long-term perspective and are attempting to develop the required changes in attitude and behaviour through changes in management style and a significant increase in employee involvement. Cell-based teams have been set up as part of this process, but the teams are not as yet involved in quality measurement. Employees report improvements to management style and the degree to which they are involved in changes.

### **Walesco**

Walesco is part of a British owned group of foundries. The site has just over 200 employees, of which 30 are head office staff. In recent years the number of employees has increased slightly, though there were fourteen blue-collar redundancies in 1992. The company faces a tough market situation as it mainly supplies to the construction and road building industries, and competes mainly on price. The site gained BS5750 part 2 recognition in 1989 (converted to ISO9002 in 1995) but there has been limited progress on TQM apart from this. Some voluntary cross-functional teams have been set up and many employees have received training on problem-solving, though employees complained that they had not had the opportunity to use this training. Moves to introduce cell-based teams have been made, but these have been delayed because of other pressures. Union representatives and other employees stated that they would support TQM initiatives if only management would introduce them.

### **Northco**

Northco is part of a British owned multi-national, mainly supplying products to the automotive industry. This site manufactures switch controls to many of the major car manufacturers. Demand is cyclical and there are constant pressures to reduce costs. Northco currently employs 1340 people, but recent years have seen fluctuations in the headcount: 1400 in 1995, 1100 in 1992 and 3500 in the 1970s. The majority of the workforce are blue-collar and about three-quarters of employees are female. The original TQM ideas were copied from an American sister company, with 1000 employees put through quality awareness training in 1989/90. All employees have since been trained on the tools and techniques of TQM. Originally daily quality team meetings were held, but these were cancelled as it was felt that the cost in labour time could not be justified. There appears to be little drive behind TQM from senior management. Task-based teams exist in most, but not all, production areas. One manufacturing manager stated that he considered the 'hard - tools and techniques - aspects of TQM to be the most important.

## **The Debate: Employee Involvement under TQM**

Employee involvement is often regarded as being fundamental to TQM (Oakland, 1989) as it requires employees to take responsibility for the quality of their own work, and demands their active participation in the search for continuous improvement. The employer introducing TQM seeks to gain employee commitment and co-operation rather than just compliance (Wilkinson A. et al, 1991, Dawson, 1994), and this requires a culture change which includes the greater involvement of employees in the decision

making process (Hill, 1991b). According to the TQM gurus, supervisory roles are taken over by workers, particularly in relation to quality control. Self-regulation by work groups removes the need for tight supervision and not only sustains increased effort, but also leads to self-development (Robertson et al, 1992). Middle managers become facilitators, encouraging participation, teamwork and the delegation of responsibility and accountability.

In theory, one might expect that employee participation under TQM would translate into increased training on quality and problem-solving; increased top-down communication of company plans and performance, usually via teambriefings; increased bottom-up communication of suggestions for improvements; the creation of task-based work teams which monitor their own work performance and seek to implement continuous improvement; and the setting up of cross-functional teams to handle particular problems. However, empirical research indicates that the idealised model of TQM is difficult to find in practice (Wilkinson A. et al 1993, Dawson 1995). Many British firms have proceeded in a half-hearted and partial way, as managers seek a 'quick-fix' to satisfy short-term goals. Such an approach may emphasise the 'hard' measurement and control aspects of TQM, leading to a neglect of the 'soft' side which is more concerned with culture, training, teamwork and employee participation (Wilkinson A. et al, 1992).

### **The limited nature of employee participation under TQM**

Many managers we have interviewed claim that their employees are empowered, but nearly always add the caveat 'as long as they check with me first'. Management at Westco talked about 'controlled empowerment. It was very clear from the interviews that, although managers stressed the empowerment aspect of this concept, the employees we spoke to felt that much of the emphasis was on the 'controlled' part of it. This control was reinforced by the use of teamwork, which replaces external with horizontal control - peer pressure. Thus, the degree of participation offered by TQM is strictly within an agenda set by management and it certainly does not extend to significant power sharing or participation in higher level decisions (Dawson and Webb, 1989; Wilkinson A. et al, 1992; Rees, 1996). To be meaningful 'empowerment' must reflect a genuine shift in the focus of power (Sewell and Wilkinson B., 1992a) but the limited nature of involvement under TQM must lead to questions as to whether empowerment has really occurred. The managerial nature of employee involvement under TQM - as opposed to industrial democracy - is, therefore, open to criticism. However, employees do seem to perceive benefits from TQM, for example the

reduction in close supervision and the opportunity to influence the day-to-day decisions concerning their work.

Without seeking to ignore the profit-seeking motives of TQM, nor the more fundamental conflicts of interest between capital and labour that are involved, a question which should be asked is whether the changes in working practices under TQM, and the forms of employee involvement associated with it, are an improvement on the previous employment relationship and HR practices? It is argued that the employee involvement of the 1980s, under initiatives such as TQM, is more managerial than the industrial democracy of the 1970s. This may be true and is certainly worth pointing out so as to contextualize TQM and see it within its limits (Wilkinson A. and Willmott, 1995). Nor should we be surprised if TQM fails to solve the contradictions of capitalism. However, an evaluation on more pragmatic lines is arguably a more interesting and useful test. Moreover, care must be taken to evaluate **current** employee involvement practice with **actual** experience of the 1970s, not an idealised view of what occurred then. How great were the benefits to employees of so-called industrial democracy in the 1970s?

Though acknowledging the argument that TQM is part of a process to incorporate employees into managerial thinking (Tuckman, 1994) by reconstructing the way one sees organisational relations through images of markets and 'customers', it is too easy to highlight how far employee participation under TQM falls short of industrial democracy. Perhaps the real question is whether or not TQM, as put into practice, is perceived by employees as an improvement on the previous regime in each organisation. Moreover, it should not be taken as given that senior management's interpretation of quality is necessarily adapted without challenge or modification by other actors in the social process at work.

### **Claims for employee empowerment under TQM**

TQM is argued by some (e.g. Ishikawa, 1985; Juran, 1988) to be the antithesis of scientific management. Workers take control of the day-to-day decisions affecting their own work, and as employees take on more responsibility and accountability the scope of their work is enhanced, skill levels rise, and the work environment, morale and motivation all improve. However, the picture of TQM as a universally beneficial and empowering force is not accepted by all writers on TQM. Critics have argued that, with its emphasis on reducing variation (Parker and Slaughter, 1993) and tighter managerial control of the production process, TQM is simply an extension of Scientific

Management. While the rhetoric gives the impression of lessening managerial control, it is argued that TQM intensifies work and increases managerial surveillance and control (Delbridge et al, 1992). Quality measurement systems monitor the performance of individuals and teams, and performance that deviates from target can be easily identified. Above average performance can be analysed by breaking the work process down to its components and then used to intensify the work of others - a process very reminiscent of Taylorism. Below average performance can lead to disciplinary action. The effect of this surveillance is to make the existing power relationship more apparent, thus strengthening it (Sewell and Wilkinson B.b, 1992).

It is worth noting, however, that grand claims for the 'empowering' nature of TQM were not explicitly made by the earlier quality gurus such as Deming, Juran and Crosby who were quite circumspect about the nature of employee involvement under TQM. Indeed the term empowerment was rarely used in the early quality management literature, the concern being more with management action and behaviour - the role of the employee usually limited to problem identification. For example Deming's 14 point plan for introducing quality management (1986) is focused on the changes management need to make, with no mention of employee involvement or empowerment. Juran (1988) mentions employee involvement only in passing, and when he discusses the setting of quality objectives and targets, employee participation is not involved. The fundamental quality problem, as perceived by the gurus, was to get the systems right. Getting employees involved would be a fruitless exercise until management had addressed this underlying problem. The more evangelical concept of the empowerment of employees entered TQM via Peters (1989) and other 'pop management' writers (Hill and Wilkinson A. 1995, 14-16). This literature tends to be superficial, trivialising the conflict and tensions that exist within organisations (Marchington, 1995). Thus, attacks on the limited nature of involvement under TQM are more an attack on the pop management literature, rather than on the theory of TQM as expressed by the earlier quality management advocates.

### **TQM and Employee Involvement in Practice**

Employee Involvement (EI) is an elastic and multi-dimensional concept (Collins, 1994). The participative structure of TQM is made up of three separate but integrated elements (Wilkinson A. et al, 1992): the educative element; changes in the work process itself; and the various teams that are set up to tackle particular or on-going problems. Employee involvement within each of these elements can take on different forms, with the degree of employee involvement varying greatly. Each of these forms

can themselves be implemented to a different extent by management, further increasing the variation in employee involvement which is found in practice. However, the variation in employee involvement initiatives between one organisation and another may be camouflaged because managers use the same terms to describe what are, in practice, vastly different schemes.

**The educative element.** This is concerned with increasing customer awareness within the organisation, informing employees of product market conditions, and the importance of each individual's contribution to the quality of the final product. Examples here are house journals, posters, customer awareness, quality and product training; and increased employee contact with external and internal customers to understand their needs and problems. An article in the house journal stressing the importance of quality is very much at the low end of the employee involvement continuum, whereas training and customer contact are located further along it.

This element varied considerably between the companies. At Walesco there was no training on quality or customer awareness as part of the induction process and quality training for existing employees involved a problem-solving course which was not followed up with any real action. At Southco, in contrast, all employees underwent a two-day off-site quality awareness course, followed by up to one hour per week on-going teamwork development. This training is highly valued by employees who feel that it is now almost driven by the teams themselves. At both Eastco sites it was decided that there was a need to build teamwork and quality awareness. For the workers at Industrial this was a voluntary two-day session at a holiday park. At Aerospace the two-day quality awareness training was compulsory and those refusing to attend were threatened with dismissal. The management at Boardco, Scotland view quality awareness training as less important than leading by example through management behaviour changes and increased employee involvement in the development of new initiatives.

**Changes in the work process.** At its most basic level, this could mean just removing inspectors from the production line as workers take on the responsibility for quality, or it may involve the more significant restructuring of work units into cells and/or the creation of semi-autonomous work groups. Again the diversity in the ways these are implemented increases the range of employee involvement actually found on the ground. Within the companies involved in our current research, restructuring into work unit cells varied from the minimal to quite radical changes to the previous ways of working. At the lower end it involved just the creation of smaller product work groups

with minimal job rotation within the cell, fairly traditional supervision - though supervisors were renamed team-leaders - and little development of any team spirit. At Southco, in contrast, they have developed largely self-managing teams who can set their own production targets, determine task allocation, make many decisions on the method of working, decide on overtime requirements, recruit and train temporary workers when they feel they are needed, and elect their own quality team leaders.

**The various teams set up to solve problems.** These take the form of quality circles, quality action teams, problem solving groups, etc. Here again, practice in the companies varies considerably with significant differences in the level of managerial input and control. At Northco the agenda for each meeting is pre-set by management with the supervisor sitting in to ensure the workers don't waste time on "idle gossip". At Southco, Eastco and Westco, in contrast, the workers are more free to decide what problems they consider most important within their own work environment, and how to tackle those problems. At Northco the working party set up as part of the process to give new life to the TQM process is seen as a way of marginalising the unions, whereas at Eastco, Industrial, union representatives are actively involved in the working parties.

Many of the employees interviewed felt that there had been benefits to them from the changes introduced under the umbrella of TQM. They reported greater input into how their work was carried out and how changes were introduced. They received more information from management and were able to make suggestions which were more likely to be actioned. These benefits may be considered trivial in the wider context of the overall power relationship, but improvements in job satisfaction are of importance to workers. Employees at Southco, Eastco, Westco and Boardco-Scotland reported that the new initiatives had increased job satisfaction, even though they were working harder, because they could now influence the way they worked and because their jobs were more interesting. Job security, safety and the work environment were also felt to have improved in many cases.

## How to be for Quality?

Given the need for each organisation to adapt TQM to its own situation and requirements, the parties involved have an opportunity to imprint their personal objectives on the process (Preece and Wood, 1995). Drawing on Foucault, Munro (1995:131) argues that it is not a question of being for or against quality - "who can be against quality?" The question should be "How to be for quality?" How do the different parties involved reshape their interests in the context of quality? The extent of management dominance achieved via human resource management and cultural control techniques is perhaps overstated in much of the Foucauldian-based analysis. Employees are not simply passive agents when faced with these new management practices and will react in formal and informal ways (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). Not that all employee resistance should necessarily be seen as linked to the potential increase in control implicit in the new management practices. As Thompson and Ackroyd (ibid:617) also argue, the extent to which employee 'misbehaviour' can be seen as simply a response to managerial initiatives is limited, with those misbehaving having their own agendas and priorities.

Despite acknowledging that not all resistance is linked directly to new management practices, it is still informative to consider how three of the parties - middle managers, employees and unions - can use the quality banner in their own interests, and so gain some benefit from otherwise potentially threatening changes to working practices and management style.

### (a) Middle Management:

TQM theory suggests that it changes the role of middle managers from holders of expert power to facilitators. Removal of expert power is perceived as a significant threat to many middle managers and they may therefore resist the introduction of TQM - or alternatively go along with it but emphasise the 'hard', controlling aspects of TQM - as a way of maintaining the existing power relationship. Nor can it be assumed that middle managers and supervisors will be in support of greater employee involvement. Many will see moves towards employee empowerment as 'soft' management (Marchington et al, 1993), removing their authority over subordinates.

Yet it is not all negative for the middle manager. The literature on employee participation has tended to ignore the desire among managerial employees for more influence and involvement (Hill, 1995). In some cases middle managers may feel that



they themselves gain influence over decisions taken elsewhere in the organisation that affect their work. Some may also feel that it gives them a chance to show their initiative and so increase their career prospects (ibid). Though the focus of little research to date, TQM may well be more empowering to middle managers than to other employees (Hill, 1991b). Despite losing a degree of functional expert power, managers may 'enrol' quality as an expertise in its own right. If 'customer is king' and the push for quality is customer driven, then the middle manager with his or her quality expertise can become spokesperson for the customer and so may be able to protect their own power base (Munro, 1995:146). Middle managers may also use their own survey data of customer satisfaction with their unit's performance to challenge the ratings of senior management (Wilkinson A., 1994).

As might be expected, the reaction of middle management varied considerably, though more within companies than between them. For some middle managers the change to a more participative approach matched their own preferred style and allowed them to 'shine'. For others the desired changes had proved a difficult transformation and indeed some had been re-located to other jobs within the company or had been made redundant, often as part of a delayering process. For a third group there had been a calculative change in behaviour to either keep their position or maintain their chances of promotion. The opportunity to delegate many day to day decisions to team level had allowed them to concentrate on providing numbers and graphics to confirm to senior management how well their section was performing.

Munro argues that delegation may not lead to a reduction in power for managers, and that in practice it is not a question of delegation but distancing. All accountability is placed on subordinates, what he calls the 'Teflon approach to accountability'. Although using the rhetoric of empowerment, 'management by distance' gives the subordinate no allowable excuses for missing targets, they **must** be achieved - "Its your problem now, you deal with it". Rather than empowering subordinates 'management by distance' makes the life of the manager easier and puts pressure on subordinates. This point was made by a team leader at Southco who felt that he had been given all the responsibility of his manager, but without the authority or acknowledgement for the achievements the team had made.

Preece and Wood (1995) also note that though measurement systems are a central part of TQM, managers may take measurements with other objectives in mind. These other objectives may include increasing control over subordinates, fending off pressure from superiors, and as a basis for reward or punishment.

(b) Employees:

Given the work intensification and the increased monitoring associated with TQM, the positive response of employees to TQM found in some studies (e.g. Hill, 1991a; Wilkinson A. et al, 1991) and in our research could be thought surprising. Critics argue that TQM is part of a process to control workers' subjectivity (Tuckman, 1995:74), with external control legitimised by the demands of the customer and the market. Employees become immersed in the logic of the market and so incorporated into managerial thinking. A senior steward at Eastco felt that the message that employees needed to work harder for the company to survive was now understood on the shopfloor and an employee at Southco stated that pay negotiations were less confrontational now as employees trusted management to pay them what the company could afford.

However, Hill (1995:50) argues that employees are not "cultural dopes" or easily "seduced by the rhetoric" of TQM, and their support is dependent upon trust in management and the perceived benefits to themselves. Indeed, research into retailing by Hill and his colleagues found that the discourse of quality and customer service was a double-edged sword whereby employees could 'reconstitute' management as much as management 'reconstituting' employees (Rosenthal et al 1997) The employees we have interviewed are under no illusions as to senior management's objectives behind the introduction of TQM. These objectives were given as: "to improve customer service"; "to make the company more competitive"; and, more bluntly, "to increase profits". No employee felt that initiatives had anything to do with improving their working life - that was a possible side-effect, not a management objective. Consequently, workers do not buy into TQM in an unconditional way. Though the reaction of employees to TQM is often positive, Hill (1995:45) notes that "quality management is not universally welcomed" and not all employees at any given level in the organisation are keen to get involved. Furthermore, as Thompson and Ackroyd have argued, much research overstates the effectiveness of management practices and 'innovatory employment practices and informal organisation will continue to subvert managerial regimes (1995:29). At a sister plant to Walesco, employees were reluctant to get involved in TQM training and teamworking because, employees claimed, they were more concerned with getting their work done. Management acknowledged that this reaction was most likely a way to get at management by refusing to do what management asked them, but that it was hard for management to argue against this expressed desire to work harder. At nearly all the sites, the introduction of a 'more caring management style and the harmonisation of conditions had led to an increase in absenteeism, which

management had to clamp down on, often reverting to more autocratic management styles in the process. The reaction of employees to TQM is likely to vary from one organisation to another depending on the style of management and approach to TQM found within that organisation. Workers react towards managerial initiatives (Wilkinson A., 1994), basing their response on how they interpret management's behaviour.

Management style appears to be one of the main factors in determining employee reaction. Employees who were positive about the changes were clear that recently management style had dramatically improved, as at Boardco-Scotland, Southco, Westco and Eastco-Industrial. The employees who expressed doubts about quality management tended to be those who were less convinced about the depth of changes in management attitudes and behaviour, e.g. Boardco-Midlands and Eastco-Aerospace.

It is, however, not only current management actions that are an important influence. The actions of management in the past are also a significant factor determining employee attitudes. At Eastco, the new management team had introduced several single status policies and even a two year no redundancy promise, but these were all initially met with cynicism from the employees because of the actions and broken promises of the previous management group. At Westco, in contrast, managers were reported to often lapse back into autocratic behaviour, but this was excused by employees because they knew that "their intentions were right".

(c) Unions:

Unions are rarely, if at all, mentioned in the writings of the quality gurus, and the industrial relations aspects of TQM often can be neglected by employers. TQM, like much of the prescriptive writing on HRM, is unitarist in approach and is regarded as essentially a management policy and outside the union sphere of influence. However, because TQM involves changes in working practices and job control - traditional areas of union concern - industrial relations issues become increasingly important at lower levels in the hierarchy (Wilkinson A. et al, 1992).

Kumar argues (1995:40) that the nature of management inspired changes to workplace practice which seek to achieve greater efficiency and flexibility "poses serious challenges to unions, threatening their traditional role of defending and advancing worker rights" and "has the potential of seriously harming the unions". This, Kumar notes, leaves unions with a dilemma on whether, and how, to support or reject the

initiatives. Certainly TQM and its associated employee involvement initiatives can be used as a way to actively marginalise the unions or, alternatively, managers can seek to use it as a way to build a high trust, or 'partnership' relationship (IPA, 1992; Godfrey and Marchington, 1996) with the stewards. In our research we have come across both of these approaches. At Boardco, the group HR Director made no secret of the fact that increased direct communication and other quality management initiatives were partly seen as a way to marginalise the unions and a similar view was expressed at Northco. By contrast at Eastco the introduction of TQM had involved a closer relationship with the unions and a greater use of joint working parties to handle areas such as pensions and absenteeism. Fitzgerald and Rainnie (1994) argue that the latter approach may also lead to a loss of workplace union power as it is subservient to a unitarist perspective and the management quality agenda. From our research to date, it should be noted that where this approach has been adopted, neither the unions nor management perceive there to have been any reduction in union power.

TQM, to be successful, can not be imposed on the workforce and, therefore, where the company has high union membership, union support will almost certainly be required. Case study evidence from the USA (Kochan et al, 1995) suggests that the key to union support is the full involvement of union representatives in the TQM process. This gives unions the potential to influence the process in a way that is more beneficial to themselves. Mohrman et al (1995) report that, in the USA at least, unionised firms are more likely to use quality councils, which steer TQM away from an individualistic approach to a more collective one. This matches the increased use of joint working parties reported at Eastco. In gaining the support of the unions, the role of the union representative may be enhanced, creating new sources of power (Kochan et al, 1995). Not that this is detrimental to TQM, as Mohrman (1995) also found that the greater the involvement of the unions, the greater the positive impact of the TQM process. In our research, managers generally felt that the unions had not been a barrier to the introduction of TQM and if anything their impact had been positive. There had, however, been resistance from shop stewards at Eastco, Aerospace - where the introduction of teamworking had been postponed when industrial action was threatened over teamworking bonus payments - and at Boardco, Midlands, where teamworking was also reduced in scope because of shop steward resistance. At Northco, management stated that they could not introduce changes without considering the response of the stewards because that would increase the risk of industrial action. However, most of the shop stewards interviewed felt that they had helped the process, for example by emphasising the need for management and the unions to work together and in ensuring consistent management practice.

The unions can also use management's need for union support and employee commitment to push for improvements in working conditions and HR practices. These gains give the impression of union effectiveness, so strengthening their position and standing. The abstract nature of 'quality' can also be used by the unions, allowing them to appropriate quality for their own purposes and so use it as a means to challenge management. For example the TUC has introduced the 'Quality Work Assured Servicemark' in the public sector, an award given to bodies which demonstrate their commitment to quality staff and services (TUC, 1994). The definition of quality management is thus extended to include commitment to employee recruitment, training and development. In general the stewards we interviewed felt that TQM was not a threat to the unions in their workplaces and, in fact, gave them many of the changes they had been requesting for years, such as improved communication and training. Some stewards reported that they had been able to argue for greater consultation, more management consistency, improved working conditions and better health and safety. As Kumar argues (1995:71)

"....work reorganisation also presents new opportunities to increase labour's role and influence in enterprise decision-making based on their own independent agenda on humanisation of the workplace".

TQM is, therefore, not something that can be conclusively described as beneficial or detrimental to the parties involved. Although potentially threatening to middle managers, employees and their unions, under certain conditions it may also be used by each of them to further their own interests.

### **TQM in Context**

Employers implement TQM with a variety of objectives, in a vast range of product markets, which use different production technologies. These organisations are of different sizes and face different market conditions. Lawler (1993:3) argues that "TQM ... needs to take conditions at each company into account". Similarly, any analysis of TQM needs to take an organisation's employment and industrial relations history, its culture and market conditions, and the intentions of senior management into account.

The rhetoric of senior management, and the names given to their TQM and employee involvement initiatives, sound superficially similar when comparing organisations, but the motives and practice can vary dramatically (Wilkinson A, 1995). For example,

managers may report that team briefings are held on a regular basis, but what does this mean in practice? It could range from twice-yearly meetings where management read out a prepared statement of the company's financial performance with no opportunity for questions, through to daily team meetings where questions and suggestions from workers are actively encouraged.

TQM initiatives can not be analysed in isolation from the other company policies that impact on the employment relationship. The credibility and acceptance of any quality initiative is partly governed by management's treatment of the workforce (Guest,1992), and therefore the organisation's HR policies and the level of trust in management need to be considered. For example, Hill (1991b) found that positive employee assessments of the quality programme in the company he studied were reinforced by other important changes in personnel policy, such as a move towards single-status. From a different perspective, Sewell and Wilkinson B. (1992a) argue that the workers in their case study put up with the increased surveillance and control of TQM partly because of a fear of dismissal. Management did not feel they could rely on the goodwill of the workforce and so introduced a tight monitoring and disciplinary mechanism. This may say more about management and the employment relationship at that company than it does about TQM. Similarly McArdle et al (1995) state that the willingness of the employees in their case study to accept the intensification of work, caused by TQM, was related to the rationalisation process carried out prior to its introduction. The responsibility for enhanced control was shifted away from management on to external forces, i.e. the market, and fear of redundancy became a key motivator.

The approach taken by management and other contextual factors certainly had an impact on employee reaction to the TQM initiatives imposed on them. Ownership appears to be one important factor in that it can partly determine management style. At Eastco, the new Japanese owners had stressed the importance of a participatory approach, and had made investment in the plants conditional on a change in management style. However, employee response to the new ownership was influenced by their perception of local management. At Industrial the change in ownership was welcomed and the new managers introduced seen as an improvement on the past regime. There was a general feeling of a new start which held out the promise of greater job security and the TQM initiative had been largely internalised. At the Aerospace site, in contrast, most of the previous management team remained in place and TQM was still seen as externally imposed. At Southco, the change in ownership was seen more negatively by employees, who felt that it was having a detrimental impact on the progress in teamworking that they had made. The new ownership had introduced a

more negative response amongst employees who felt that their hard work was now being taken for granted by a company that had little interest in them.

Downsizing is a factor that might be predicted to have a considerable, and negative, impact on employee commitment and therefore support for TQM. Why support changes aimed at introducing greater efficiency if the only outcome was unemployment? Management at most of the companies had understood this potential barrier to the acceptance of the new initiatives, and had either introduced written no-redundancy policies, as at Eastco, or had attempted to minimise the impact of redundancies by increased use of early retirements and redeployment. In practice, however, the relationship is not as straightforward as might be expected. At Westco, one part of the site had experienced regular reductions in the headcount, while in the other section there had been considerable recruitment. In the first area TQM and teamworking had been actively supported by the workforce who saw it as a way of possibly minimising job losses as well as increasing job satisfaction. However, in the more buoyant section the large number of new recruits had diluted the culture that had been developed so creating a new barrier to TQM.

Employee involvement under TQM has a complex and multi-dimensional nature and any analysis in this area needs to be tempered by an understanding of the vast variation that occurs in different organisations. It is necessary to delve beneath the rhetoric and jargon used by management and to understand the context into which TQM initiatives are being introduced.

### **Conclusions**

To its advocates, TQM is unequivocally good and beneficial to all parties involved, and deservedly attracts bouquets and universal acclaim. Alternatively, from a labour process perspective, it represents an intensification of work, shifting the frontier of control firmly in management's favour. The problem is that each of these perspectives is blinkered and the reality is more dependent on local circumstances and motives than either argument would suggest. While it might be re-assuring to shower TQM with bouquets, this ignores the unitarist perspective and managerial nature of employee involvement under TQM. At the same time, whilst academic credibility may be enhanced by hurling brickbats, TQM can offer greater job satisfaction and is, in general, greeted positively by employees and shop stewards. It may also be possible for the different parties to use the quality banner in their own interests. Quality management is implemented in a variety of versions, displaying several faces, and employee

involvement under TQM is multi-dimensional with reality often obscured by rhetoric and jargon. While it is always possible to provide findings to support a theory, a broader perspective gives a more complete picture where people may be working harder but also enjoying greater job satisfaction. There is a need to remove the blinkers and put TQM initiatives into the context of each organisation, studying not only the market situation, the industrial relations history and the HR practices used, but also how 'quality' is understood and used by all the parties involved.

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