Quality management for today's academic library

By Rush G. Miller and Beverly Stearns

Identifying and meeting users' needs

During the 1990s there has been a mad dash toward the implementation of quality management in academic institutions, including libraries, with a corresponding proliferation of books, journal articles, and step-by-step workshops on the topic. This wave of interest has been met by a concomitant degree of skeptical resistance from many academic administrators and librarians who view it as just another fad, or who doubt its practical utility in a nonprofit setting. Despite success in improving the quality of Japanese and American automobiles and other products, can quality management principles succeed equally in academe? Is it essentially different from current management models (e.g., participatory management, consultative committee structures, and collegial academic governance)?

[*Ed. note:* Although this article reviews many of the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM), the authors prefer to use the term quality management in the context of nonprofit, educational institutions.]

What is quality management?

To understand what quality management is, we must recognize what it is not. According to Albert Koller, TQM is not:

- a magic solution to every problem;
- a way to delegate problems to a third party;
- a way to bludgeon workers to produce more output;
- surrendering supervision or leadership;
- total reliance on statistical controls;
- a playground for "human relations" enthusiasts;
- a new way to complain to your management.[1]

In simple terms, quality management is ". . . a system of continuous improvement employing participative management and centering on the needs of customers."[2] It is more a pervasive culture than a management theory. Some key principles underlying quality management include:

- the organization focuses its resources on meeting the needs of "customers," both internal (other library departments/employees) and external (students, faculty, university staff, etc.), as opposed to the needs of the organization;
- the goal of the organization is to improve the quality of services/processes on a continual basis as opposed to major innovation and change;
- analysis of problems or services is based on objective fact, using standard measurement tools in order to isolate the root issues/problems;
- employees are empowered to work collaboratively in self-directed teams under a unified vision developed jointly with administrators.

What these principles mean in academic libraries

A focus on customers implies that quality in the library is defined by internal and external "customers" and what it takes to meet their needs successfully. One might argue that, in the past, librarians have defined quality of service for users, often measuring quality by size of budget or collection or numbers of items circu-

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lated. In a quality management environment, however, the library seeks to discover what users need and then designs services to meet those specific needs. Quality would be what our users tell us it is. It is the users' problems that are paramount, not those of the service providers, keeping in mind that customers are both students and faculty, as well as internal library departments and staff who rely on other departments and staff for services. Systematically listening to and tracking users' needs allows for continuous improvement and the development of new approaches for delivering valuable services to those users.

Quality improvements are not based on dramatic innovations which move the organization ahead suddenly, but are based on steady progress in all areas, even areas in which no major problems have been identified. Quality management is not results-oriented, but process-oriented, which, in the long run yields improved results. The goal is not to produce the best possible output today, but rather to provide the capability and means for producing the best possible output each day. Honda Motors' emphasis on continuous quality paid off in high sales volumes, not from improved marketing or pricing, but because consumers gravitated toward its high-quality products. In other words, it is better to ensure high-quality service now than to waste time and energy down the road dealing with users whose needs are unmet. Patching up poor services is more energy intensive and less efficient than designing high-quality and user-oriented services in the first place.

Quality should be determined and evaluated systematically through objective, factual problem analysis. Tools typically used for this purpose include flowcharts, fishbone diagrams, Pareto charts, control charts, and histograms, among others. Depending on the nature of a problem, one or more of these techniques are utilized to pinpoint the root cause of service deficiencies and to suggest alternative solutions.[3] As Ted Marchese pointed out in a recent issue of *Change*, ". . . the central idea here is to get managers and work teams to move beyond decision-making by personal impression, anecdote, or complaint."[4] In some ways, this particular aspect of quality management is open to the charge that it is just plain old common sense and nothing new. Perhaps it is simply a matter of emphasis and ties in with a total change in the culture of the organization.

The team management approach

The entire organization must believe in and stand by its humanistic principles in order to support each individual's pursuit of quality. Administrators must support quality management principles fully, relinquishing much control in order to foster the development of leadership skills throughout the organization. Potentially, the heart and soul of quality management in an academic library is the empowerment of employees and the increased level of participation garnered through team management approaches. Participatory management, at least in theory, is not new in academic libraries and many of the principles of collegiality and consensus-building that underlie quality management are already endorsed widely in libraries. The use of empowered teams in an academic library, however, requires an additional change in the organizational culture, in how people relate to one another, and how work is accomplished. It is very much an evolutionary change instead of a revolutionary one. The culture of the organization changes gradually and those institutions which are successful in implementing quality management must be willing to expend both the time and effort to achieve positive change over the long term.

We do this now! We have committees

A common criticism of team management is that it is no different from the committee structure most libraries employ. However, there are differences between committees and teams, at least theoretically:

Committees

- members appointed by administration
- result-oriented with specific charge
- leadership appointed
- agendas set with charge
- broad participation not required

Teams

- Members are those who "do the work"
- process-oriented
- leaders chosen by team
- agendas set by teams
- everyone participates

Barriers to quality management

Most academic institutions that try to implement quality management fail. Reasons for failure are numerous and may include:

- it is not a quick solution to problems and many administrators lose patience with the approach;
- professionals are reluctant to relinquish their expertise to the "whim" of the customer;
- middle managers feel threatened by perceived loss of power in a flattened organizational structure;
- the jargon usually associated with the business world is unfamiliar to academics and is often uncomfortable for librarians;
- many managers perceive an inordinate amount of time and resources required for training and development activities;
- just another "fad"—nothing really new.

Benefits of quality management

If implemented carefully, quality management principles yield positive benefits in an academic library, such as:

- incremental changes lead to continuous improvement—quick solutions may yield only partial results;
- forces library managers to develop leadership skills instead of relying on power within position to obtain results;
- increases staff participation in decision-making, thus increasing the feeling of "ownership" of decisions and directions once charted;
- improves the level of training given to staff, thus increasing skills;
- helps break down barriers between library departments and improves communication within the organization;
- provides a method of improving services to users in a period of limited resources.

The BGSU experience

In response to flattened budgets and increased costs, as well as reductions in staff size, Bowling Green State University (BGSU) Libraries underwent a multifaceted reorganization in 1992. The goal of this reorganization was to utilize more effectively available human resources to meet the mission of the libraries. Specifically, structural changes involved combining areas with similar or parallel functions into much larger departments to allow more flexibility in reengineering workflow around the features of a newly installed integrated system and in accommodating essential services with fewer personnel. At the same time, the use of self-managed teams replaced a traditional committee structure to develop policy and decision-making generally, as well as to enhance interpersonal skills and foster improved communication and cross training. While not a full TQM system, the BGSU system incorporates many of its main principles into a more democratized and participatory management structure.

Teams were formed to deal with policies and services in critical areas of collection development, preservation, physical facilities and environmental concerns, research services, access services, technical services, human relations, and professional development and training. Each team of eight or nine people includes librarians and support staff members who are more or less permanently assigned to the team. Other staff members may join a team to discuss a specific issue or to serve as a resource person.

Each team selects its own leadership and determines its own basic agenda and schedule, with some overall limit on total time consumed by team meetings. Teams use the Libraries' Strategic Plan, which has been in place since 1987, as well as a team manual, which serves as a guideline for team interaction and communication. The manual addresses behaviors and skills essential for effective team interaction such as conflict resolution, consensus decision-making, tolerance, trust and respect, shared power, creativity, motivation, and rewards. It also provides practical suggestions for avoiding team subverting roles such as shutting off others, labeling behavior, dominating discussions, and naysaying, among others.

The assistant dean for library services coordinates team activities and serves as the liaison between teams and the administrative bodies of the libraries. Team facilitators meet regularly with the assistant dean to ensure that issues which cut across team lines are coordinated properly and cross-team communication is facilitated. Issues from preservation to collection development to access are being addressed by teams, but these issues are interrelated and require teams to coordinate policy proposals with one another.

Teams are responsible for identifying problem areas, gathering and analyzing objective data, developing alternative solutions, and proposing changes to policies and procedures to improve library services to internal and external constituencies. Their proposals generally are made to an administrative council within the libraries, the members of which are respon-

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