TQM Comes To Campus

The student as customer and king.

Total Quality Management became a business buzzword in the eighties. Now it's going to school. Better known as TQM, this customer-is-king philosophy is sweeping campuses nationwide as colleges and universities seek solutions to soaring costs and a diminishing pool of students.

Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw introduced TQM to Syracuse University in February 1992 as part of his plan to make the University more student centered. Since then, more than 800 administrators and staff have attended TQM seminars in a continuing effort to immerse the campus community in its principles.

TQM, according to Chancellor Shaw, "asks far more of us as employees than simply doing our jobs. In order to reap the benefits of the system, we must come together to study our customers' needs, examine our present operations, cull unnecessary and time-consuming steps, and become willing to take risks as we try new methods."

Although success must be measured over the long haul, TQM has already been credited for several improvements at SU. Here are two examples:

• The custodial staff grumbled for years about sunflower seeds, while faculty and students groused about messy classrooms. Campus vending machines sold the snack with zebra-striped hulls, which invariably ended up on classroom floors, making for a sloppy learning environment, damaged cleaning equipment, and cleaning delays.

This issue was examined by one of SU's first quality improvement pilot teams, which simply got the custodians and their supervisors together to discuss the problem. The discussions led vending services to stock pre-hulled sunflower seeds. The results were cleaner classrooms and happier custodians, faculty, and most important, students.

• A survey from a TQM pilot team uncovered an annoying problem in the bursar's office. Many registering students were waiting in long lines only to discover, once they reached the front, that they couldn't register because of a financial problem, such as an unpaid campus parking ticket or a library fine.

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In response, a computer terminal was placed in Bird Library to provide students with up-to-date information about their financial status. By using a private code, students can now access their bursar accounts, discover any unpaid fees or outstanding student loan payments, and deal with the situation before trying to register.

Similar improvements, whether minor or major in scale, are necessary if SU is to remain a viable institution, says Paul Bobrowski, an assistant professor of operations management in the School of Management and a TQM expert.

"We have reached a point where there is a greater supply of university services than demand in this country," says Bobrowski. "For us to succeed, we must be responsive to customer requests. We need a systematic approach to improving. TQM is a philosophy initiative that doesn't end. It keeps going and going."

Bobrowski says TQM can be boiled down to three basic principles:

1. Customer Focus. "Universities are nothing more than highly educated businesses that serve students, and you must reorient the services being offered to keep the customer in mind. At one time most businesses had a customer-is-king mentality, but in times of plenty, customers were not always paid much attention. If one person didn't like something, there was always somebody else to take up the slack. With fewer buyers, higher quality is necessary, and quality depends on meeting or exceeding customer requirements."

2. Continuous Improvement. "Too often we neglect incremental changes for long periods of time because we're waiting for the big changes. The problem is people's expectations increase little by little, and if a university doesn't make continuous improvements, it'll wind up with dissatisfied customers."

3. Total Involvement. "Successfully applying TQM requires the total involvement of all your people. At a university, you think of teaching and student interaction with faculty. However, students' impressions of a university are just as influenced by contacts with administration and staff members. You need a customer focus throughout the workforce. Employees must be made aware of how their work can change and influence their customers, who are students."

—*Bob Hill*