

Quality Circles

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What is a Quality Circle?

- Voluntary groups of employees who work on similar tasks or share an area of responsibility
- They agree to meet on a regular basis to discuss & solve problems related to work.
- They operate on the principle that employee participation in decision-making and problem-solving improves the quality of work

Number of members ranging from 3-12 people.

They focus on specific issues to resolve problems.

They generally meet weekly to analyze work related problems and propose solutions to Management and where possible implement those solutions.

Members also tend to generate a mutual respect and trust as they work on solutions, which is conducive for collaborating as a team.

How Do Quality Circles Work?

- Characteristics
 - Volunteers
 - Set Rules and Priorities
 - Decisions made by Consensus
 - Use of organized approaches to Problem-Solving
 - All members of a Circle need to receive training
 - Members need to be empowered
 - Members need to have the support
1. Participation in Quality Circles needs to strictly be voluntary. If members are forced to participate, it does not allow for a conducive team building environment.
 2. The members of the Quality Circle set the rules and prioritizes/selects problems that will be approached and discussed by the team.
 3. All decisions are made by consensus, encouraging open communication.
 4. Organized problem-solving should be utilized, which would include brainstorming and cause-and-effect diagramming. This organized approach also prevents the circles from holding unproductive sessions as well.

Ishikawa, when developing this concept always believed that everybody should be properly trained to use the 7 Tools of Quality Control:

1. Pareto Charts
2. Cause and Effect Diagrams
3. Stratification
4. Check Sheets
5. Histograms
6. Scatter Diagrams
7. Control Charts and Graphs

He also believed that the circles should be empowered enough to see their recommendations through. Along with empowerment, it is expected to have management support. Many times Circles have collapsed due management lack of interest or interference.

How Can They be Used in an Organization?

- Increase Productivity
- Improve Quality
- Boost Employee Morale

Quality Circles can be used in any organization, whether it is Manufacturing, Service, Health Care, Education, etc.

They can be used to increase productivity...as an example, members can develop ways to decrease lead times for products.

They can be used to help improve quality of services as well as products. If there are issues, members can analyze the process and come up with solutions to make it better. This will improve quality and likely increase productivity as well.

Real World Example

- At Penn State University in 1983, a Quality Circle was formed by Professor Hirshfield, a Professor of East Asia History.
 - Selected 8 Students from a large lecture class
 - Resulted in increased involvement from the class

Hirshfield, selected 8 students for this endeavor and had them study the purpose and operation of Quality Circles and used the methods that they learned to determine the type and frequency of written assignments, the content of lectures and the method to be used for testing.

The decisions made by the Circle resulted in change to the course structure and content. Some of the actions were the use of daily outlines, increased student participation in the selection of poetry and films used in class, and urged the use of contemporary analysis to illustrate the use of course material to modern problems.

Hirshfield felt that Quality Circles are a valuable academic tool. It provided students with experience in decision making and problem solving as well as an increase in student familiarity with course material.

Problems with Quality Circles

- Inadequate Training
- Unsure of Purpose
- Not truly Voluntary
- Lack of Management Interest
- Quality Circles are not really empowered to make decisions.

A lack of understanding what Quality Circles may cause management to be reluctant to initiate circles, act upon circle suggestions or being eager for quick solutions, may implement too early.

Some circles are not given a clear purpose or direction. Without having a clear purpose it is difficult to be a productive team.

There are times that members are assigned to circles instead of volunteering. Under circumstances like this, the employee at times is reluctant to be part of the team.

Management loss of interest in the project that the circle is working on is also a hindrance in the success of the circle.

Without empowerment and support of the management staff, circles will not have the resources provided to them to be successful.

Summary of History and Practices

- Quality Circles were first seen in the United States in the 1950's
- Circles were developed by Dr, Kaoru Ishikawa in Japan in the 1960's
- Circles were re-exported to the US in the early 1970's
- 1980's brought Total Quality Management and a reduction in the use of Quality Circles
- Quality Circles can be a useful tool if used properly

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