

TEN WAYS TO MAKE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT UNSUSTAINABLE

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Introduction

In the USA and the UK something funny has been happening to the institution of marriage. We have all heard of course that the number of divorces has been going up. But slightly less well-known is that the number of marriages has also been going up – Elizabeth Taylor is not the only one: many of us just keep on trying!

Something similar seems to be happening to public service quality improvement projects, only this time in reverse. We all hear of more and more improvement projects – and the QC conferences are great places for doing that. These conferences are oceans of hope, aspiration, hard work and general enthusiasm – and it is a wonderful, infectious feeling.

What we hear very little about, however, is the other side of the equation – the quality projects that fail, either straight away or after quite a short time. They fade out, lose momentum, disappear from the website. As far as we can tell there are many, many of these. And it is not only the public sector – if you read the private sector literature on TQM and re-engineering carefully, you will find that a high proportion of those projects also collapse or partially fail within quite a short period (e.g. Champy, 1995, p3; Joss and Kogan, 1995; Schiavo, 2000; Zbaracki, 1998). In fact we probably radically underestimate the failure rate because, unlike the situation with the launch of new projects, it is not in many people's interest to tell stories of failure.

In short, many quality improvement projects in both public and private sectors turn out to be *unsustainable*.

Why is this? From my own academic work – and to some extent from my own experience as an academic manager – I would like to suggest ten common 'failure modes' – ten ways in which projects fail to last.

1. They are political pet projects (sometimes launched to gain publicity at some significant time such as an election). Being identified with a particular politician or party, they are ditched when that individual moves on or that party loses power.
2. They run up against the sensitivities of the upper level officials when the latter realize that quality methods involve co-decisionmaking (with rank-and-file staff, clients, stakeholders) in ways that apparently reduces their hierarchical authority.
3. Similarly to 2 above, in highly professionalized organizations such as hospitals or universities, quality schemes wither away if they appear to be separate from or rivals to existing professional procedures for ensuring standards. The other occupational groups may use the new methods but the top professionals ignore them or actively resist participation (Joss and Kogan, 1995).
4. The initial choice of technique is inappropriate for the particular organizational context. For example, an elaborate, form-filling approach is chosen for a group of

- staff who have traditionally enjoyed high discretion, or a system that depends on exact measurement is suddenly applied to an organization which has previously used few if any quantitative measures.
5. Improvement schemes are launched with special, additional/earmarked staff and/or money, and when the additional support disappears, the project fades away
 6. Those launching the initiative make great claims for it early on, promising 'transformation' 'empowerment' etc. When the actual results are much more modest other staff lose trust in the leaders, and it becomes very difficult to 'embed' the initiative. This is particularly likely to happen when a project is visibly led by consultants from outside the organization.
 7. They rely on trained staff but the training is once-only, and the trained staff subsequently move on to other posts or organizations (Zbaracki, 1997). Gradually there is no-one left who knows how to do it.
 8. They never manage to spread from the enthusiastic minority to the unenthusiastic majority. So they don't take root, and once the (originally enthusiastic) minority gets busy with other things they gently fade away.
 9. Schemes are succeeded by another, newer reform fashion. This often happens in high-intensity reform countries such as the UK or the USA. The result has been called both 'reform fatigue' and 'redisorganization' (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993)
 10. Last, but not least, schemes become bureaucratized. They become box-ticking, formal exercise only loosely coupled (if at all) to actual results. So they do survive, but only as organizational deadweight. This has happened to some public sector annual appraisal systems.

Answers?

Needless to say, there are no quick fixes. Much could be said about each of these reasons for failure. But in general terms it is clear that sustainability often depends on achieving, as soon as possible, two broad goals:

- The quality initiative needs *wide ownership* – not just leaders or enthusiasts but rank and file staff, clients, other stakeholders. How one does this depends on the particulars of the groups one is trying to get on board.
- The quality procedures need to become *embedded, routinized, a normal part of everyday organizational life* – to lose their special 'additional' or 'extra' character.

Thus one might think in terms of the paradox of sustainability: *in order to achieve sustainability the quality initiative must become invisible, just part of 'how things are around here'*.

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