TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT (TQM) IS BUILT ON THE FOUR CORNERSTONES OF CUSTOMER FOCUS, CONTINUOUS PROCESS IMPROVEMENT, MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP, AND EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT. ALTHOUGH EMPOWERMENT IS OFTEN THE MOST DIFFICULT OF THE FOUR CONCEPTS TO IMPLEMENT EFFECTIVELY, ORGANIZATIONS THAT HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN EMPOWERING THEIR EMPLOYEES INEVITABLY SEE BOTTOM-LINE IMPROVEMENTS.

EMPLOYMENT HAS BEEN DEFINED AS THAT GROUP OF PRACTICES DESIGNED TO DRIVE DAY-TO-DAY DECISION MAKING TO EVER LOWER ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS. SUCH PRACTICES INCLUDE IMPLEMENTING SELF-MANAGED WORK TEAMS, HIGHLY AUTONOMOUS IMPROVEMENT TEAMS, WORKERS WITH ULTIMATE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN QUALITY ASSURANCE, AND HIGHLY EMPowered CUSTOMER INTERFACE PERSONNEL. EMPowered EMPLOYEES MAKE DECISIONS AFFECTING THEIR WORK AND THEIR CUSTOMERS, OFTEN AS MEMBERS OF TEAMS, AND WITHOUT CONSTANT SUPERVISORY REVIEW AND APPROVAL.

ULTIMATE SUCCESS IN IMPLEMENTING EMPOWERMENT DEPENDS ON THE SINCERE COMMITMENT OF BOTH EMPLOYEES AND MANAGEMENT. IT IS THE ROLE OF R&D MANAGERS TO ENSURE THAT THEIR ORGANIZATIONS ARE TRULY ON THE ROAD TO COMMITMENT AND NOT MERELY FORCING COMPLIANCE OR HEADING TOWARD CHAOS.

CREATING THE VISION

IN AN EMPowered ORGANIZATION, ALL EMPLOYEES MUST BE SINGING FROM THE SAME SONG BOOK. IN OTHER WORDS, MANAGEMENT SHOULD ARTICULATE AND COMMUNICATE ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS AND STRATEGIES IN SUCH A WAY THAT THE PUBLIC, EMPLOYEES, VENDORS, AND CUSTOMERS UNDERSTAND WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE ORGANIZATION. TO ATTEMPT EMPOWERMENT WITHOUT FIRST CREATING THE COMMON VISION IS TO INVITE ANARCHY. AS A FREED SLAVE IS SAID TO HAVE REMARKED ON HEARING OF THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION, “FREE [EMPOWERED] TO DO WHAT?” MANAGEMENT CANNOT ABDICATE ITS RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNICATE A VISION, WHICH EMPLOYEES, IN TURN, MUST EMBRACE AND OWN.

JAMES A. WARD is an independent management consultant in the Jacksonville FL area specializing in systems development project management and implementation of TQM in information systems. He can be reached at (904) 278-9634
Communication in all directions and across all levels of management and employees is the key to creating a common vision. Ideally, customers and vendors should be included in the exchange. Electronic mail, Internet access and such systems as Lotus Notes have given organizations tremendous new capabilities to communicate, give and receive feedback, and carry on dialogues.

Publicizing and Adhering to the Mission Statement
An organization should have a published and well-publicized quality mission statement with which organizational behavior is absolutely consistent. Getting management to subscribe to a quality mission statement is the easy part. The difficulties arise in achieving wide dissemination of the mission statement and in actually conducting business in a manner consistent with TQM principles.

Implicit in the TQM methodology is the belief that employees will act with understanding and good faith consistent with objectives that the organization must achieve to meet customer requirements. Unfortunately, in some organizations with supposedly active quality programs, employees are unaware of quality efforts. They regard quality as just another management propaganda program that does not affect them.

Employees who don't even know that their organization has a quality mission statement, let alone what the statement says, cannot be empowered. In most such cases, the organization’s customers and vendors are similarly unaware of the quality mission. Customers are used to living with what they get and feeling lucky to get anything at all.

The preceding paragraphs highlight a major weakness in the way organizations cooperate, manage, and organize themselves. Although the goals of the marketing, manufacturing, and finance functions sometimes conflict, empowered employees in cross-functional teams can work through these conflicts. Employees are often eager to do so, in many cases far more so than their managers, who often exercise power by encouraging and fomenting conflict. Intense focus on the customer should be the essential guiding principle.

For an organization to be truly successful in the pursuit of quality, all employees, customers, and vendors must be brought into the process. Commitment and mutual trust must be established.

BUILDING TRUST
Workplace Security
In the minds of most employees, trust is synonymous with security. With fears of downsizing and outsourcing prevalent in many organizations, terms such as reengineering and empowerment have come to mean a prelude to layoffs. The kind of trust necessary for the truly creative work and initiative essential to R&D success does not exist in most organizations in America today.
Organizations can foster commitment and build trust by executing an agreement to empower with their employees. This agreement creates the common understanding necessary before empowerment can be effectively implemented. Unless a sense of trust is established in the workplace, efforts to empower are doomed, because employees will simply refuse to take the kind of initiative that thriving businesses require.

To encourage the willingness to take risks, the agreement to empower should assure employees, in writing, that risk taking will not be punished and that layoffs will not result solely from increased quality, productivity, and efficiency. In this way, managers reassure their employees that empowerment does not become a cruel hoax and demonstrate the constancy of purpose that W. Edward Deming always talked about.

**Changing Management Attitudes**

In R&D organizations, management of knowledge workers—those who must think and create in their jobs—has always required an atmosphere of trust and openness for the realization of optimum results. In many R&D organizations, however, inherent distrust presents a formidable barrier to successful employee empowerment. Too many managers want to make all the decisions, don’t provide sufficient freedom from supervision, and are too ready to blame employees when problems arise.

Because trust, like respect, is always a two-way street, employees will never trust management that does not trust them. Management attitudes must therefore change before employee attitudes will change. A real problem in this area is fear of change. Managers must make the decision to overcome this fear and realize that employees can and will do an outstanding job of managing their own work if given the proper leadership and training. By concentrating on removing fear rather than creating it, managers will build trust.

One TQM guru cites an organization’s travel expense policy as an example of trust. In an empowered organization, a travel expense policy is not needed. If an employee can’t be trusted to act in the interests of the organization, then it follows logically that the employee cannot be allowed to travel on the organization’s behalf. In another company at the opposite end of the trust spectrum, no less than 11 people, 2 of them vice-presidents, reviewed every travel expense report. Not one of the 11 people believed they were doing their jobs unless they could cut travel expenses—and this in an organization attempting to implement TQM.

It is highly likely that the real goal of this company’s very lengthy and detailed travel policy was to discourage employees from traveling on company business. Managers should reconsider the goals of the travel policy in their organizations in light of employee empowerment. Similarly, organizational dress codes are often indicative of management trust or lack thereof. After all, logic would argue that employees who cannot be trusted to dress appropriately for work can hardly be trusted to manage their own work.
TRAINING MANAGEMENT AND EMPLOYEES

Assessing Costs

Quality guru Philip Crosby preaches that “quality is free.” He is right in that the money saved through producing quality products and services the first and every time more than offsets the costs of scrapping them, reworking them, and losing customers.

Quality, however, requires a substantial initial investment in training and education, and this is where management commitment usually starts to flag. After endorsing quality and issuing pronouncements and waving banners, management almost invariably underestimates the amount of time and money needed to educate its work force. Failure to provide sufficient training is an early sign that the organization needs to strengthen its commitment to quality before proceeding.

Organizations that are unprepared for employee education and training and have not studied the experience of such tremendously successful quality companies as Motorola and Xerox are usually surprised at not only the amount of training required but at the type of training needed. In initiating its quality program, Motorola spent more than $6 million in training, much of it for remedial English and mathematics skills.

Training and education must therefore begin with an assessment that starts at the top of the organization and works it way down. Managers should not assume that employees understand the business or that they possess theoretical knowledge of basic business functions. One of Deming’s most enlightening statements is, “Experience teaches nothing unless studied with the aid of theory.” All of management and a critical mass of employees must be educated before the implementation of empowerment can begin.

Focus of Training

The goal of education is to equip employees to do their own problem solving. Employees cannot be empowered until they have acquired the knowledge and tools to act effectively within established organizational processes and procedures. The freedom to act comes from knowledge and competence, as well as from authority and accountability. Empowerment without training is a certain recipe for chaos.

Customer Relations. A key area of training is customer relations. Organizations must make a concerted effort to broaden the nature and frequency of employee interactions with customers. This is especially important in problem solving after delivery of a product or service, where empowerment really pays off. Organizations that fail to provide adequate training in customer relations have found a strong negative correlation to quality. But because they have also found immediate performance impacts, with particularly strong impact on the bottom line, from providing this training, managers should ensure that all employees can see the ultimate customer using a product or service.
Providing a Comprehensive Education. Managers should take care not to underestimate the need for remedial education. Employees must then be trained in quality awareness, philosophy, and techniques. They must be educated in the company business—its products, markets, and customers—and be familiar with financial performance measures, an area that warrants its own discussion in a later section. Because employees must understand how to function as members of teams, they should receive cross-training that provides them with a larger view of the organization than just their immediate functional responsibilities.

Providing Financial Information

Because business decisions are no longer made exclusively by management in empowered organizations, empowerment requires that employees acquire a thorough understanding of financial and accounting information, historically the property of top management and accountants. In empowered organizations, this information is disseminated, and employees are trained to read the company’s balance sheet, cash-flow statements, and income statement. The purpose of this financial information is to help employees throughout the organization understand the financial implications of their actions and provide a basis for more effective operational decision making.

In one organization, for example, the chief executive expects every employee to be able to immediately answer two questions:

What are the economics (i.e., the bottom-line impact) of your job?
What are you working on right now to reduce costs and increase profits?

Employees feel more committed and make better decisions when they are aware of the financial implications of their actions. They are more highly motivated and see their own destiny tied more closely to the success of the organization.

Establishing Teams

Employees exercise empowerment most often as members of self-directed work teams or highly autonomous improvement teams. Team participation strengthens employee commitment and reinforces the skills of team members. Teams are more effective than individuals because they have more resources at their disposal, a broader range of skills, much greater decision-making authority, and better access to information. They also take responsibility for their actions and decisions.

In most organizations, teamwork represents a significant change of direction. Managers need to emphasize team participation and performance and can do so by ensuring that reward systems recognize teamwork as opposed to competition and individualism. Reward and recognition systems are the keys to implementing teams, because nothing sends a clearer message to employees about what is expected and encouraged.
Managers should form teams to initiate improvements in all processes within each department. They should rely on functional team members who are most familiar with the task, method, or process under investigation for the improvement and not use cross-functional teams for these activities. Instead, cross-functional teams should be formed to address how each department works with internal customers and suppliers and to break down organizational barriers. As the organization matures in this process, teams should be formed with external customers and suppliers to address everything the organization does.

Empowerment and TQM demand a level of teamwork that most professionals find uncomfortable at first because of their unfamiliarity with it. Because many R&D professionals are used to working in relative isolation, managers must ensure that they receive training, active encouragement, and ultimately rewards for their contribution as team members. Teams require ongoing encouragement, support, and coaching—activities that demand a changed role for management as well.

Managers must give teams sufficient authority to implement their decisions. In addition, if managers do not act quickly on employee-generated improvements, empowerment will quickly die. Managers therefore need to carefully nurture the team-building process. Too little authority is seen by employees as just the same old way of doing things. Too much authority initially, however, may confuse team members who are not accustomed to making decisions.

As organizations mature in the team process, they find that even far-reaching opportunities, usually the province of management and the budget process, are best handled by quality teams. Teams put the power in the hands of the people who must ultimately make the organization work.

A MATURE AND EMPOWERED ORGANIZATION

Managers are the key to employee empowerment—they must educate themselves and their employees, involve everyone in the organization, provide visible support, be willing to take risks, and implement reward and recognition systems that encourage desired employee behavior. They must break down barriers between functions, departments, vendors, and customers. When senior management refuses to make tough political and policy decisions based on employee improvement efforts, empowerment becomes abandonment.

Empowered and committed employees understand what the organization is trying to achieve and how they are going to achieve it. Both employees and the organization prosper from the employees’ freedom to act based on competence, authority, and accountability. Employees will do whatever it takes to make the organization’s mission happen, including changing the way they do their jobs. This attitude contrasts sharply with that of employees who comply with processes dictated by managers who provide organizational knowledge on a need-to-know basis only.
Structure and order, when accepted from within rather than imposed from outside, are liberating rather than restricting. They free employees to be more successful and more creative, both in quality and productivity, driving new levels of customer satisfaction and excitement. This is where the fun really begins.