

TRAINING FOR CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

ALFRED H. JAEHN

TRAINING IS VITAL to a company's long-term success. Of the now famous "14 points" prescribed by the late W. Edwards Deming, "instituting" training, education, and self-improvement are included in two of them. World-class quality leaders, including Baldrige Award winners*, cite training as a critical ingredient for achieving continuous quality improvement.

Most organizations now realize that employees, or "associates" as many are now termed, are their most important asset. This realization may not go far enough because, in fact, employees are the organization. If one accepts this rationale, it is essential that management make a commitment to spend time, effort, and money to train them.

Unfortunately, much of the training delivered in many companies is lacking in establishing a base for continuous quality improvement. Most often it is provided as a corrective action in response to a major problem. It is not structured as a means for employees to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to enable them to help the company achieve its quality goals.

Most often, training is directed toward how to do the job and not on how to do the job more efficiently with fewer errors and at lower costs. Little information is furnished on how the various factors of the employees' work relates to either the subsequent steps in the process, i.e., their internal customers, or the expectations of their external customers. Also missing are topics of extreme importance such as what is the company's strategic mission, what are its goals, and what is its definition of quality.

MAKING TRAINING A "WAY OF LIFE"

Achieving continuous improvement begins with laying a foundation of concepts, techniques, and basic vocabu-

*EMPLOYEE ATTITUDES ARE CHANGED;
EMPLOYEES START TO ANALYZE PROBLEMS
RATHER THAN POINT FINGERS.*

lary on which to build a viable program. The initial challenge in setting the stage for continuous improvement is to convince employees that the quality initiative is not a

"program of the month" but rather a commitment for life. The role of training is to help employees understand why quality is important and why their involvement is needed.

Members of the organization must receive education about quality concepts and obtain training in specific skills needed to work smarter and as a team. A review of the training efforts of Baldrige Award winners provides some interesting insights. At Eastman Chemical Co., a 1993 award winner, everyone receives quality training in statistical control, team skills, problem solving, and positive reinforcement techniques, in addition to specific job-related training. Supervisors act as coaches and create opportunities for employees to practice their newly learned skills. At Wainwright Industries, a 1994 award winner, the company invests up to 7% of its payroll in training and education to assure that their associates have the knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish their quality and performance objectives. All associates take courses in quality values, communication techniques, problem solving, statistical process control, and synchronous manufacturing—a systematic method of identifying and evaluating opportunities to simplify processes and reduce waste. At Milliken & Co., a 1989 award winner, training is further extended to suppliers and customers. Each year more than 7500 visitors receive training in quality principles at Milliken's dedicated training facilities.

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE TRAINING PROGRAM

To arrive at a training strategy, a company begins by looking to its leaders to determine business objectives and specific goals. Once these are clarified, an employee task team is deployed to ascertain training needs and priori-

* Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award—Profiles of Winners, U.S. Dept. of Commerce National Institute of Standards and Technology, Gaithersburg, MD.

ties. Such a team is also invaluable for examining the training activities developed to determine weaknesses and strengths.

Equipping employees to participate in the continuous improvement process should be the primary focus of training. This requires developing a comprehensive curriculum covering the right topics in the proper sequence. It begins with the concepts of quality and continues with the skills required to measure and control quality, identify and define problems, and seek and implement solutions.

The training program must link with the corporate culture so that employees can relate to it. The training effort should not give the appearance of responding to another new trend or fad but rather be looked upon as an integral part of the company's long-term quality commitment to its customers.

DELIVERING THE ESSENTIAL TRAINING

Management must view training as a portion of every employee's job. It cannot be considered as an add-on

whenever deemed necessary by the company. Attendance at training programs is mandatory.

To support quality improvement, the training staff must be highly respected and well qualified. Consideration also needs to be given to commissioning those employees who best understand the improvement process to teach others how to use it. If an adequate in-house training staff is lacking, instructors from local colleges or consultants can be used. It is important, however, when using outsiders that they have some familiarity with the industry, its processes, and its jargon in order to achieve credibility with the personnel being taught.

Training should encompass a variety of methods and media to maintain interest. Group exercises to obtain hands-on experience should be encouraged. When training employees in specific methodology and techniques, efforts need to be made to relate it to their jobs. Using examples based on data and experience from the plant and office is extremely helpful.

A FINAL COMMENT

A successful employee training program provides numerous benefits. Employee attitudes are changed. A sense of empowerment develops. Employees start to analyze problems rather than point fingers. Territorialism is reduced. People begin to work together as a team. Employee commitment to the company and vice versa is cemented. Without these, it would be impossible to achieve continuous improvement. TJ

Jaehn is a quality management consultant for the process industries, 1430 Clyde Ave., Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494 (715/423-8164). He is a TAPPI Fellow, an ASQC Fellow, and a certified quality engineer and quality auditor. He served as an examiner for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for three years.